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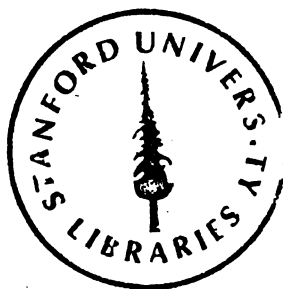
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The
JOB SECRETARY
❧ *A STORY* ❧

BY MRS. WILFRID WARD





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An Impression

BY

MRS. WILFRID WARD

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"THE LIGHT BEHIND"; "GREAT POSSESSIONS," ETC.

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

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I

It has been said by a critic of modern life that the upper classes in Europe are developing the habits of a nomad tribe. The Frank Norburys were quite unconscious that they had caught the infection of this tendency, as indeed they were unconscious of the effect of many other kinds of fever in the atmosphere in which they lived. The money spent on their little outings to Cairo, or Assisi, or Canada would have allowed them to live in comfort in the old home, which they let to a Liverpool merchant because they "could not afford" to stay there. Frank Norbury often sighed at the thought of the dear old family home, and the good old days when his uncle had kept

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open house. Then he would reflect that, after all, Sophy could never have endured a monotonous country life; but he did not reflect on the further point—whether he could have endured it himself. The Norburys each year took small furnished houses, or flats, in fashionable parts of London, at rents that would easily have provided a permanent house,—nay, furniture and rates and taxes as well,—in some parts of town for which they had no contempt.

It is observable in the modern civilised nomad man that he is inclined to think that each new house he takes or any new scene he visits is to become in some sense permanent. He always says, "I will come here every summer," before leaving the little Alpine or Italian village in which he has spent three weeks, and which he will probably never see again. And in the same way the Frank Norburys, on coming into a furnished house in London for three or

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four months each winter, always discussed for at least a week the delightful possibility of the owners being ready to part with it altogether for a very reasonable sum of money. Sometimes Sophy Norbury prolonged the subject into the third week of their stay when it was really out of date.

“Do you know, Frank, I believe it is true that our landlord is half ruined and would be only too glad to get rid of this house?”

Sophy was sipping her mineral water with little rosy lips, while her round blue eyes looked at Frank with a child's eagerness. The Norburys never drank wine and ate very little meat, but the man guest who was present had excellent hock provided for him. When the Norburys lunched at home there was always a man guest, for they always felt more domestic and

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at ease in the presence of a third person. The man guest eagerly assured them that it was the best possible moment for buying houses in London, but Frank, who seemed in low spirits, shook his head and alluded gloomily to rates and taxes. Sophy told Brown, the distinguished looking valet who was so kind as to wait at table when they were in London, to bring the coffee. The guest went on with the question of the house, but he soon saw that Mrs. Norbury's eyes had a far-away look in them; indeed she was trying to plan out quite clearly all she had to do that afternoon.

"Can I take you anywhere in the motor?" she asked the guest, and without waiting for an answer went on, "But Frank, what's the matter? You have looked extremely glum all through luncheon."

"Miss Archiefield has to go away for a month."

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"Miss Archiefield! Oh, Frank, what a nuisance. She so exactly suits you. Dear me, what a blow! How can you finish your book?"

Both of them now looked in the depths of woe. Miss Archiefield had been Frank's secretary for nearly four months, having worked for him while the Norburys were staying in a cottage near her own home in Surrey. Afterwards she had followed them to London and had come to him daily from her lodgings.

"Poor thing, her father is dead, and her mother has to leave the vicarage, and they will be as poor as rats, and Miss Archiefield must stay with her until they can move into a workman's cottage."

Frank's voice was heartbroken. He and Sophy were really sympathetic souls and grieved for the utterly capable secretary as well as for themselves.

"I can't replace her," he said, crossing

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his small, thin legs, and puffing out the smoke of his cigarette while his thin cheeks were flattened by the process.

"Was she so very good?" asked the guest.

"The best secretary I ever came across, very clever and trained to her finger tips."

"I am awfully sorry."

"O, it's tragic!" cried Sophy.

"But only for a month," said the guest.

"Well, yes," said Sophy. "That's true. Do cheer up, Frank. After all it's only for a month."

"But my book," cried Frank. "I can't drop that for a month. And it's my best time of year for work. One can really do nothing worth having after Easter."

For a moment Sophy was again extremely gloomy. But then she brightened.

"I'll tell you what," she cried to the guest, "you and I will go and find him a

new secretary, in the motor—only a job secretary. We should just have time if you would not mind going first to Lady Cromleigh's to hear a wonderful Frenchman talk about the Symbolists. We need not stay very long. We can easily slip away; but then—O, dear, I must have ten minutes—barely ten minutes—at a hat shop, quite a private hat shop in Cromwell Road: and then we'll go to Miss Farley's at Campden Hill. I promised Miss Farley ages ago to help to find work for some of her secretaries. Miss Farley trains girls to be secretaries. She does it quite splendidly."

"But you are sure, Sophy, that it won't bore you?"

"Not in the least."

"Then I can go to golf." The gloom lifted from Frank Norbury's face. It was a long face for his size, and narrow. When he was not fussed or worried it had a very

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pleasing expression, thoughtful, kindly and gentle.

It was eleven o'clock next morning when Frank, coming into the narrow back and front drawing-room that took up the whole depth and breadth of the little house, found Sophy looking out of the window.

"She hasn't come, you see," he said in an aggrieved voice.

"I don't give her up yet," said Sophy. "Miss Farley declared that she was sure to come, and she is only half an hour late. I wonder——"

Frank's mind was too preoccupied for him to notice that Sophy had broken off in the middle of a sentence. She had been carelessly watching a figure in black that was standing on the threshold of the house opposite. The door had been opened two moments before by a footman, who had apparently answered a question in the

negative, for he had shaken his head in speaking. He had then come out on to the doorstep and glanced up and down the street, as if seeking to find something he wanted. Finally he looked straight at the house taken by the Norburys and seemed to be pointing it out to the person in black. It was then that Sophy began to wonder. The figure in black was that of a woman in trailing garments. The trailing tendency began with her veil and was carried out behind her feet by her skirts and her umbrella. She turned from the footman, whose attitude was exemplary, her very pale face and her very large eyes, and gazed in anxious contemplation at the house opposite to her. Sophy instinctively drew back from that gaze into the shelter of the curtain as she again said, "I wonder . . ."

Then the lady gathered her skirts around her with one gloved and one ungloved hand and, after some parting words to the with-

drawing footman, came down the steps and paused again on the pavement. With another little lift of her skirts she was about to cross the street, when she dropped the umbrella in front of her into a small morass of liquid mud that had been pushed on to one spot by the rotatory broom of the L. C. C.

"O, dear!" cried Sophy, quite as much in condemnation as in regret. The white-faced lady, with the greatest difficulty, took up the umbrella by the clean emerging end of the crooked handle, and held it out with a certain graceful air of triumph, as of one whose fishing had been successful. At that moment a glove that should have been on the left hand fell lightly into the morass, where it had obviously to be left to its fate. Then the lady seemed really in despair, and gazed at the Norburys' house as if her plight had some connection with it.

"It is, it is," thought Sophy gloomily, as she turned away from the window. "It

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undoubtedly is the job secretary. O, Miss Farley, how could you,—and you promised me an intelligent, capable girl!”

The doorbell rang, and Frank left the room and stood out on the landing. A moment later he came back to exclaim in dramatic undertones:

“It is all right. She has come, and she has been shown into the study.”

II

FRANK NORBURY felt distinctly shy as he went down to the little study to meet his new secretary.

"I've shown Mrs. Carstairs into the study, sir," said Brown, who was preparing to come upstairs as Frank descended. When he got into the room his first impression was of a tall, slight woman with a very white face and dark eyes. Her hair was hidden by the veil turned back from her forehead. It was not like a motor veil,—rather it gave a vague suggestion of a Frenchwoman in mourning, as it fell into the folds of the cloak which again seemed to become part of a long black skirt. A short black kid glove, unbuttoned, was on one hand, contrasting with a surprisingly white wrist. The other hand wore no

glove, and he just noticed the solitary wedding ring on the long, thin finger. He felt at once that she was not in the least shy, but neither had she any air of being consciously self-possessed. She gave him a graceful, rather elaborate bow.

"I was fortunate in finding the house so soon," she said with a smile, "as I had forgotten the number. I hope I am not very late."

Frank had expected her to explain that Miss Farley had told her to come, and then it would have been natural to make some remarks as to her own qualifications as a secretary. She only said with the same courteous smile:

"I very stupidly left my fountain pen and tablets at my lodgings. Could you lend me a pen?—and if I put some sheets of paper together that would do for a pad. One needs something firm for shorthand writing."

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Frank produced a pen and an author's pad, and Mrs. Carstairs sat down in a leather armchair, her drapery spreading round her in all directions, and looked at him in an expectant attitude. Frank was not conscious of having told her that he wished to begin with dictation; but he felt that it would be rude to keep her waiting, so he went to his table and drew out several scraps of paper on which he had scrawled some passages of a short story the day before. It was his favourite method of work to read aloud everything he wrote before it was typed. He needed to hear his own words at quite an early stage, and he often found that in the act of dictation some quite new thought was suggested; his imagination was excited by the action into a livelier motion. He was casting his eyes down a page covered with scribbled writing when he heard the fire irons clatter, and, looking across, he saw that the secre-

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tary was bending low and apparently seeking for something in the grate. He came forward to help her, and just avoided treading on his pen which had rolled almost to the writing table.

"O, thank you. I thought it had dropped into the grate, and it must have gone just the other way."

It was something in her manner of receiving the pen that first made Frank feel consciously on his good behaviour, and he suppressed a little tired sigh as he sat down again. Then seeing the courteously expectant face awaiting his communications he started off. He had dictated about half a page when he was interrupted.

"One moment," said the shorthand writer. He paused.

"O, dear," with a little cry of distress. "O, dear!" she repeated. "I forgot for a moment that it was to be shorthand. I was too much interested in what you were say-

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ing. I wrote the last sentence but one in the ordinary way. What a pity, for I have quite lost my place. I thought somehow that you would say what the girl did with her hands, or rather what she held in them. They seemed a little lost, don't you think? I must be at least three lines behind you now. But if you don't mind going back a little bit it will be all right. Please go on."

But Frank could not go on. He was worried now by this question of Malestra's hands. Would one perhaps have held a flower? The very white thin hand in his sight held a pen, and he would rather like Malestra's fingers to curve like them. He turned his full attention with another little sigh, this time of impatience, to his manuscript, and read with hesitation.

"The most active, the bearers of young children and the carriers of water-gourds, walk admirably. So also do the least active often walk well. It is the bustling busy-

bodies, the worriting philanthropists, who walk badly and wear their heels unevenly. Malestra's was not the walk of one whose back was fitted by hereditary use to the graceful bearing of any man's burden, neither was it the walk of the futile carrier of tittle-tattle or of little cans of soup; it was the walk of one moved to motion by'— I think that sentence is very clumsy and is going to be too long. Would you mind reading the paragraph over to me?"

Mrs. Carstairs fluttered the pages of the pad.

"Ah, here it is," she said. "No, that's not it. Yes, here. 'The most active, the bearers of young children'—it was 'young children,' wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Frank.

Then there followed a long pause. The very white face was flushed with a delicate pink as she looked at him.

"I find I cannot decipher the passage.

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Would you go on and let me make it out in the evening?"

The secretary was evidently a little distressed, but this distress did not seem to involve self-criticism. He was soon to learn that her attitude towards her own mistakes was rather one of quite detached impersonal regret. Frank felt that any betrayal of impatience would be out of place. He tried to keep all stiffness from his manner as he said that he would leave her for twenty minutes, and suggested that she should type out the sentence when she had succeeded in reading it. After that time had passed he came back to find Mrs. Carstairs looking very happy. The bonnet, or toque, concealed by the veil, had slipped back a little, and some curls of soft golden hair, a little grey near the temples, looked bright in the light of the now shining sun. It was impossible not to respond to the happy smile on her face.

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"Now is not this right?" she said.
"The most active, the bearers of young children, the carriers of water-gourds, all those whose shoulders are fitted by nature to bear with hope the burdens of a fallen race—"

Frank stared in astonishment. This was a pure effort of imagination to help out her memory on the part of Mrs. Carstairs. She evidently could not read her own shorthand writing. He was in despair, a despair hardly deepened when he found she could get no further, for the simple reason that she had typed three lines one on the top of the other.

"It is so difficult to remember to touch that spring at the end of each line. It won't take me a moment to do it again." Frank turned towards the clock. Well, there was another hour and a half to fill up, and then he could escape to luncheon, and during luncheon he must decide on

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the best plan for delivering himself of the professional assistance of Mrs. Carstairs. Meanwhile, as she could neither type nor do shorthand, how could they consume the next ninety minutes? The lady settled the question.

“I wonder if it would be of any use to you for me to read aloud what you have written so far?”

She made the offer like a kind aunt, he thought, but he accepted it as a solution of the difficulty; he abandoned the short story and brought out several typewritten chapters of his new novel and gave them to her. Mrs. Carstairs settled herself again in the armchair and began to read. Frank almost at once told himself that he had never heard anyone read better, if so well. He was soon enjoying himself,—and so, evidently, was Mrs. Carstairs enjoying herself. The first break was when she dropped her handkerchief; and as

Frank restored it to her she said impulsively:

“Your English is simply admirable!”

He had been told that his English was distinguished, was pure, was individual, was classical, in several reviews in the last five years; but this latest tribute was somehow extremely acceptable. After that she read on without interruption for another three-quarters of an hour. Then she said suddenly:

“May I stop and make a criticism?”

The manner was that of a new acquaintance, not in the least that of a secretary. Without waiting for his answer she went on:

“Don’t you think you describe Laura a little too much in this chapter? Now she is becoming dim to me. She was moving, speaking, changing in the first chapters; now she is passive, while you give an inventory of her features, her colouring, and even her dress.”

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"Ah, you follow Lessing," he answered smiling. "You think that words should describe actions and leave to pencils and paint and chisel and marble the work of material description."

"I have not read Lessing," said Mrs. Carstairs. "But don't you think it is true that those heroines are the most living who appear to us in action, and that the failures are the ones described when they are passive, like lay figures? Contrast Diana Vernon's first appearance riding up to the hero, all action and motion, with Flora MacIvor, who has a whole chapter describing her person and her history before she even appears on the scene. Contrast Becky Sharp, who gets her first material description in two lines and a half in the third chapter of her adventures—contrast her with any heroine you like, Mr. Norbury; for sheer vitality she takes the prize."

"Life is action," said Frank musingly.

“And when once life enters into a character in fiction,” said Mrs. Carstairs, “it is a case of ‘well begun is half done.’ The character will run himself and the book as soon as he is really alive. You remember Thackeray’s astonishment at the things his characters *would* say and do?”

“Then you would always try to imagine a character to yourself in action?” inquired Frank. “And in the process you would expect to find the secret of life?”

“I think so,” said Mrs. Carstairs, with as much quiet confidence as if she had created some dozen famous characters in fiction. “Of course, where you touch on life, you touch on a mystery beyond our understanding; but I think if you ask yourself how a character moves—in thought, in moral action and in bodily action—you will soon be following, not dissecting. You will cease to be the master; you may even cease to be responsible. That, you may remem-

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ber, was Charlotte Brontë's pathetic defence of her dead sister's creation of 'Heath-cliffe.'"

Frank was surprised by the sound of a gong in the next house. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly a quarter to two.

"I am sorry to interrupt this interesting discussion," he said, "but I must be off now."

Mrs. Carstairs begged to be given some copying for the afternoon. Frank, having supplied her with the first thing that came to hand, went upstairs to Sophy, who was putting on her hat with due and earnest care before going out to luncheon. She mingled groans with laughter at his description of the efficiency of the new secretary, as she adjusted her hatpins and put on her veil. But she had to hurry off, and Frank was soon making his way to the Junior Carlton Club.

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"It's all very well," he thought with a touch of irritation. "But if I am to spend many hours in delightful literary discussions, what will become of my work?"

III

SOPHY had not expected to see Frank again before night, but she was not altogether surprised when he looked in for tea. Sophy had told him that she was driving with Lady Cromleigh, and that the latter might possibly come to tea on her way home. Lady Cromleigh was the widow of a statesman who had, it may almost be said in sober truth, really disappointed his country by dying of typhoid fever at the age of forty-eight. He had disappointed Lady Cromleigh far more than anyone else; and dark lines had been graven by that disappointment on her beautiful face. These lines were not always visible, for Betty Cromleigh had intense and unconquerable powers of enjoyment; but they were very evident in the morning, or when distractions

failed to distract. It was a stormy face at such hours as these—bored, terribly bored, speaking of a big hunger and a thousand small irritations, irritations working on an almost terrible vitality. Lady Cromleigh was never quite still; and even when delight woke up and storms were lulled and sunshine played round the exquisite mouth, and the angry eyes were full of light, there was a certain restlessness of movement. When Frank came in she was sitting on the edge of a chair, and gave her usual impression of being incessantly on the move and delayed somewhat against her will. Frank was rather pleased at finding that she really had come, and was a tiny bit simple in betraying the thought as she gave him the very firm grasp of a short but well modelled hand. The fact was that she had snubbed Sophy unmercifully and without excuse for two or three years. Sophy was quite as much

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pleased at this change in Lady Cromleigh as he was; but it did not soften her feelings towards that lady in the least. She knew quite well the cause of the change, and that it was due to Frank's being known to be a particular friend of Sir Walter Middleton. Sophy quite saw, that through the medium of her little self and her husband, Lady Cromleigh could get into touch with Walter Middleton, who was not likely to stay very long in England, much more easily than if she merely acquired him as one among many other hostesses. The only point was when to come out into the open and ask Lady Cromleigh to luncheon to meet him. She did not want to be over eager in doing this, but she did want to forestall Lady Cromleigh's next move, which would probably be to invite herself to meet Sir Walter at the Frank Norburys' house. Sophy wished to keep at least the appearance of initiative.

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Frank Norbury could never be ill at ease, and his intimate friendliness usually at once created a pleasing atmosphere of temporary simplicity. The three were soon eating their muffins (Frank always insisted on muffins) with reminiscences of school-room teas, that made them feel almost as if they were actually roasting chestnuts in the little spick and span Mayfair drawing-room with its beautiful French furniture. He was about to bite into his own shining portion, after the wants of the other two were satisfied, when he turned to Sophy and said in a worried voice:

“Do you know that the new secretary is still here, and I see no prospect of her ever leaving this house.”

Then he explained to the visitor how, his own admirable secretary having failed him, Sophy had undertaken to replace her.

“It is quite impossible to convey to you what I have been through to-day. A lady

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who can neither write shorthand nor use the typewriter, and who knows so little of either art that she has no notion that she is not an adept at both. This lady, obviously a lady, a lady who can appreciate every shade of manner and would write one down a cad if one betrayed one's feelings in the least,—this lady, I repeat, spent two mortal hours in my company doing absolutely nothing. It was impossible to get the simplest thing done and equally impossible to ask her to go away. I ended by thanking her profusely and going to lunch at my club. I thought she was sure to go by four o'clock. Miss Archiefield always left at four, but——”

He was interrupted by the entrance of the valet, Brown.

“Mrs. Carstairs wishes to know if you would like to see her before she leaves.”

Frank's voice was charged with politeness as he answered:

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"Would you say that I will not detain Mrs. Carstairs. If she would kindly leave the copy on the writing table I will look it over in the morning. I hope she has had tea."

"I took tea to the study at half past four." There was a solemn note in Brown's voice, recognised by Sophy, who knew that Miss Archiefield's tea had always been taken up by the housemaid. Those words, "taken up," are usually charged with electricity, expressing a controversy which has brought many a London household to a premature collapse.

"There, you see," said Frank, as the door shut, "even Brown waits upon her. Sophy, why did you say Miss Farley would send a thoroughly trained young girl?"

"But is she old?" asked Lady Cromleigh, who was quite enjoying herself. She had one foot on the fender and her black velvet skirt and frilled violet silk petticoat

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pulled up, to get the full benefit of the blazing wood fire.

"I haven't the least notion of her age," said Frank, gloomily. "She is all shaded and hung about with veils and things. She is very pale, and she is certainly not a very young girl. Sophy, she must be stopped coming again, or I might as well put my book in the fire at once."

The valet reappeared.

"Mrs. Carstairs wishes to know if she is to come at half past nine or at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

Frank's civility to the lady downstairs sounded almost obsequious.

"O, please tell Mrs. Carstairs that half past ten will be quite early enough."

As soon as Brown had left the room, Lady Cromleigh jumped up with one rapid movement of her whole person.

"I must see her," she exclaimed. "Good-bye! Good-bye! I shall just catch her

in the hall or on the doorstep, if I am quick."

"No, come here," cried Sophy, hurrying to the window and drawing back the curtain so that the rings clattered against the pole. "She will be gone by the time you get down. I think you can see her from the window. There's no balcony."

Lady Cromleigh reached the point of vantage in time to see the secretary slowly descending the steps from the house.

Both hands were employed in lifting the trailing draperies, and the umbrella, free from the mud of the morning, was somehow also retained. She crossed the road with long steps, planting her feet on the dry spots with a certain air of adventure. Mrs. Carstairs achieved her passage exactly opposite the Norburys' windows, and having reached the haven of the further pavement, she turned round and looked about her as if uncertain whether to go

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north or south. During that moment of reflection, with her face a little upturned as if seeking for inspiration, she received the full light of a flaring gas lamp on her pale face and dark figure. It was then that Lady Cromleigh pronounced her judgment with all the force of an acknowledged authority.

"She may not be a good secretary, but she is a very beautiful woman."

Both the listeners recognised that their visitor's opinion was the undeniable truth. The three turned back into the room as if something had happened, and stood round the fireplace for a moment in silence.

"She looks," said Lady Cromleigh, "as if she had a good talking voice. Has she?"

"Yes," said Frank, who seemed a little puzzled; "yes, certainly. The only time we got on at all with my work was when she read aloud to me. The reading did make things wonderfully clear."

It was just then that Lady Cromleigh

became absent-minded, and when absent-minded the brutal element in her manner reappeared. The schoolroom atmosphere that had been engendered by Frank at tea time was dispelled, and cold social facts uplifted their heads. But after an abrupt parting with Sophy she recurred to the matter of the job secretary, in a still rough but amused voice, on the staircase.

"You will keep the job secretary all her time," she prophesied; "and Brown will always take up her tea."

Lady Cromleigh, as she drove away in her motor, still looked as if her mind were absent from the scene about her, but full of eager energy. Her grey eyes, round, but how differently and more firmly set than Sophy Norbury's, were fixed in front of her, and her lips moved.

"Carstairs, Mrs. Carstairs!" she murmured. "I have no recollection of the name, of that I am sure, but I have cer-

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tainly seen that woman before, and somehow I feel convinced that something exciting was happening when I met her. I wish I could have seen her in the hall, instead of across the street in the lamplight."

But the word "lamplight" brought the picture of the job secretary's face with a sudden vividness to her mind, and then Lady Cromleigh was astonished at not having remembered before.

"It must be! It must be!" she cried. "Or it's a most amazing likeness. Yes, the movements, the walk, the long steps. Oh, dear! The way she held up her skirt—no double could be so exactly like another woman as that! But it's impossibly foolish, only she always was a tiresome fool. I wonder if she looks older by daylight. If not, she has worn amazingly well."

A sharp sigh interrupted these words. Lady Cromleigh gave a quick glance at the little looking-glass in front of her.

“It’s better to have lived and lost one’s looks than never to have lived at all!” she said to the face in the glass. “And after all, it’s only in the early morning that I ought not to be seen. I should be exceedingly annoyed if Mr. Norbury’s new secretary had the satisfaction of seeing me before twelve o’clock! But why on earth is she here, masquerading under a false name, and just when she has a chance? Well, it isn’t my business, and I’m not so fond of her that I should risk burning my fingers in her affairs.”

She drew her sable cloak more closely round her, sat up suddenly and, as if to remind herself that life was quite full enough without troubling about Frank Norbury’s job secretary, consulted her list of engagements for the afternoon, and, in a sharp tone, gave a direction to the footman. The motor altered its course accordingly.

IV

"I WILL tell her this morning that I shall not want her after this week," thought Frank, as he drank his coffee and ate his eggs next morning. But it was with a certain alacrity that he betook himself to the study soon after half past ten.

Mrs. Carstairs had arrived, quite without any *contretemps*, and was established at the writing table with every appearance of efficiency. She rose and handed to him a roll of paper tied up in blue ribbon. It was the copying she had achieved the day before, exquisitely written out.

"I found I did not quite understand your machine, so I have written it out. I think there are no mistakes."

Frank was so surprised at the amount of industry displayed that he thanked her in

proportion to the efforts she had made. He glanced at the writing, which was curiously difficult to read; the "a's" did not shut, and the "o's" showed no daylight. But for beauty of general effect it was remarkable. She did not see a rather blank look on his face as he turned to put the copy in a drawer.

"I will look it over afterwards," he explained. "And now I should like you to read to me, if you will not be tired."

"Oh, no; I want to get on with it."

Mrs. Carstairs settled herself in the deep armchair with a distinct air of enjoyment. Every few minutes in the next half hour Frank stopped her to make a correction, and she occasionally differed from him when he wanted to make alterations or suppressions. Sometimes he maintained his own opinion, but more often he agreed with her. She apparently relied on her instinct as to the effect that would be pro-

duced on other minds, and Frank began to think her comments quite curiously right.

He was becoming absorbed in his own work, as it reached him through the medium of this most delightful reading aloud, when he realised that the secretary was hesitating and stumbling. He looked up, and after a moment's astonishment became convinced that she was blushing, and blushing at something in his story. His sense of surprise was shot with amusement, as he listened to the little breathless hesitations, and watched the pink flush reaching the broad, low forehead and even the roots of the gold hair touched with grey. She turned a little from him and, clearing her throat, made an effort to go on.

"O, but," she cried at last in a voice of distress. "It isn't natural. She is such a child she would never——" Then she stopped and looked over the next page. "Oh, I beg your pardon—I was afraid—I see now";

and she read on quite glibly to the bottom of the page. But in the middle of the following one she coloured again; and at last she exclaimed:

“Oh, Mr. Norbury, she must go back to the farm. It is getting so dark, and——”

“But, poor child,” said Frank gently, “you see she was too innocent and ignorant, and she had had no mother to bring her up.”

“But she wasn’t quite a fool.” Mrs. Carstairs’ shoulders shook with protest. She went on silently reading to herself for several moments.

“It quite spoils the whole thing,” she said, speaking more to herself than to Norbury, with nervous energy. “It’s wrong from every point of view. A girl like Laura would know perfectly well how to take care of herself. If she was the sort of silly little goose you make her out, I lose all my interest in her. It is curious, isn’t it,” she went

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on, "that at one time the conventional thing to do was to make the young girls haughtily 'stand-off' and dignified, and now the fashion is to give them an episode. Whichever is the mode, there should at least be consistency as to character."

Frank had been getting huffy as this soliloquy went on. It seemed to him that there was a distinct want of manners in the outburst of the secretary.

Suddenly she realised that she had been unconventional.

"I must beg your pardon," she said, with dignity. "I ought not to give my opinions like this. The fact is," here the dignity began to melt, "I have been so very much alone, I have become quite uncivilised. And I had been so fascinated by Laura."

"I hope you will like her again very soon," said Frank, somewhat softened by the appeal in her manner. "It really is such a small thing in the book."

Mrs. Carstairs was silent.

"But I will look it over before you read any more of it. We will skip that bit now. I fear you will think a good deal of the book too realistic."

"Do you mean by realistic that it is real or that it is objectionable? To me what is called 'realism' is often very unreal. It is possible to be notional and unreal in describing bad things as well as in describing good ones."

Though her voice was soft, she really was very crushing indeed. "I may have used the word loosely," said Frank. "All those terms are in a wild state of confusion."

"Yes," said Mrs. Carstairs. "It would seem from the modern way of talking that vice is the only reality. Why can't we have a school that treats virtues as realistically as Maupassant treated vice? The reaction from the horrors of the realistic school

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led to a disgust with their methods, I suppose.”

“The reaction goes pretty deep,” said Frank. “The realists believed in being exact copyists of nature; and, as a remarkable critic now living, whose influence is bound to increase, said, only the other day, ‘It is the second childhood of literature when men copy nature like children.’”

“But it seems to me such arrogance to suppose that we can imagine anything greater than the works of God,” urged the secretary. “You remember that Aristotle said that the portrait painter makes a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. I believe that the artist saw more beauty in the man he was painting than Aristotle did, because he knew how to look. A genius is a person who knows how to look at a real thing, whether it is the outside of a man’s head or the inside. He is not a person with a mind bigger than

Nature's mind, who goes about improving, on the Creation, but he has the clue to Nature's mind. There's a great deal more in the world, if we only knew how to look at it, than is dreamed of in our philosophy."

"Well, even Balzac protested that he was not a mere copyist."

"I wouldn't take his own account of himself. Creators are never analysts."

"Then whose would you take?" asked Frank; and the secretary began to laugh. That laugh made her realise that she ought to be serious; and, the condemned chapter being skipped, they went on glibly for another half-hour.

They had got deeper into the book, the rural incidental lover had disappeared, and the real hero had appeared on the scene. Then they passed on through a very passable plot into matrimony, and from matrimony was to arise the great tragedy of the story. But Frank was disappointed. He

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had been looking forward to hearing the account of Laura's happiness, and the gradual threatening of the coming cloud, in Mrs. Carstairs' voice. But though the reading was admirable, he felt that she was left quite cold and unmoved. At last he protested.

"You are not a bit sorry for her."

"I don't think I am. I don't like her well enough now. Besides—no, I have been too impertinent already. The writing is quite admirable. Do let me go on."

"No," said Frank with some feeling. "You *shall* tell me what you mean."

"Well, then, I don't think it was such a perfectly happy marriage. There's so much missing. They are just a man and woman who have been in love with each other, and his love is going off a little quicker than hers. To make it a real, big tragedy it ought to be—" she paused—"it ought to be infinitely more than this."

There was something in her voice that

struck a new note in Frank's mind. It seemed so full of knowledge that it came upon him for the first time that there might be much to learn from this woman's view of a life story.

What was wanting in this account of the marriage? He hesitated to ask the direct question.

"You see, they have no sense of the greatness of their position, no notion of a vocation, no idea of their own importance in the universe. They ought to find it so absorbingly interesting to have married at all—such a miracle that two souls should have come close together to help God's work in the world. They ought to feel that the oldest thing in the world is the newest. Every real marriage is a new thing, a new meeting of two of God's greatest creations, two human souls." Her voice had sunk quite low with those last words. Presently she turned a very white face towards him,

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and said: "You can't have the tragedy of a desecration where there has been nothing sacred to desecrate; you can't have the full tragedy of failure if you have not failed in a work of infinite importance."

There was acute suffering in the face, in the half-opened mouth, in the tense gaze of the eyes, in the way the head was held up as if the will were trying to keep its place above the waves of pain.

"Ah," thought Frank suddenly, "if I could make Laura express suffering like that!" But how could she, when she was only Laura, and this was such a different woman? Would it be true to her character to make Laura think of marriage as this woman thought of it?"

"But," he said, watching his secretary with intense interest, "if things were as wonderfully perfect as that, how could they ever go wrong?"

A dark colour rose in the secretary's face.

"Things went wrong in Eden," said Mrs. Carstairs.

"And yet there was no other woman in Eden," said Frank.

The secretary gave a start, and turned on him a glance of what appeared to be commingled surprise and fear, and then quickly controlled herself and gave her whole attention to the MS. But Frank felt more and more dissatisfied as she read on. It seemed as if he had drawn his picture on so miserable a scale. He thought that she forced into her voice appreciation of some passages, chiefly the descriptive ones. At last he felt so disgusted that he could have screamed to her to stop.

Brown, venturing to appear at the door with a note needing an immediate answer, was a welcome interruption.

V

SIR WALTER MIDDLETON, who had distinguished himself as a vigorous and sagacious Governor in the north of India, was at home on leave on account of his health. Rumour said that he was in London not by any means simply for his health; but then London is not properly appreciated at its real worth as a health resort. There had been friction, it seemed, between Sir Walter and the military powers—if he had been right, he had been right in a headstrong way; and there were now divers persons at home, interested in him for their own ends, some for his advancement to greater power, and others for his being politely put upon the shelf. Yet undoubtedly his health was bad enough to account for his being at home. At this moment he was preparing a series of

articles on Indian affairs, of which the first had already appeared and had been much talked of. He wrote a good but old-fashioned style, more suitable to history, (which was in fact his chief interest,) than to political polemics. Frank Norbury had stayed with him in India at a place that need not be mentioned, while Sophy remained at Simla. Frank had got to like him after the first impression. It needed a slight effort to get over that first impression. In spite of the good, dignified manner of Governor and diplomat, Frank felt at once that Middleton had not been to Eton or Oxford. Frank was soon sure that he was even socially a fighting person, distrustful of acquaintance. Middleton evidently thought himself cynical when he was sometimes only simple; and he had a temper. His virility was unmistakable, and at times a little fatiguing. Gradually, as Frank came to know him better, Sir Walter grew

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upon him. He was especially charmed by two things, which he valued extremely, if rather theoretically. One was the cold purity that seemed to be an acquired gift, strong with self conquest, and the other a real, if reserved, religious faith. Then there was a wistful sense in Walter Middleton of the great possibilities of action, if only he were not betrayed by a health that could not be relied upon. Once or twice he hinted at almost positive privations in childhood, which had left a constitutional weakness. At the same time Frank knew him to be of a good family.

"I really like him," said Sir Walter's secretary to Norbury. "But I sometimes wish he had a vice or two; it would make him better company."

But Frank, after the first, thought him very good company, and was extremely glad when he heard that he had come to London.

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He had only arrived two weeks when it became evident to Sophy that Lady Cromleigh wished to meet him in their society.

Sophy was not quite sure whether it would be better to ask Lady Cromleigh and Sir Walter to lunch at the Ritz or at home, and again, whether to have them with or without other guests. The Norburys seldom had more than the tame cat of the moment to lunch at their own house. The household only comprised a kitchen-maid, with a scullery maid, Sophy's maid, the housemaid and, last but not greatest, the valet. The valet and the maid ran the establishment and were very affable; he did the waiting when they were in London, and Adèle actually made the coffee. Brown had a man friend who helped him at any time, and he then entered in his book "Smith 10|6"; and Adèle had a friend who came when she was needed, and the housemaid's sister was a charwoman; and

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so they pulled along without an excessive amount of daily work for anybody.

Frank and Sophy paid up the books on the last night before leaving London; and Frank, every year, said in the watches of that last night, "Smith seems to run up to a good deal, doesn't he?" and Sophy answered: "He is smart and quiet," in an absent voice; and then said in her turn, "I wonder how much the housekeeping ought to come to per head per week in London?" And Frank would answer: "Oh, well, we're off to-morrow, and you need not worry about that till next December at the earliest."

But as to the little luncheon for Lady Cromleigh and Sir Walter Middleton, Frank decided that he should simply ask Middleton to lunch when they next met, and Sophy should let Lady Cromleigh know when he was coming. They were to lunch at home, and with no other guest, not so much as a man tame cat.

Adèle, of course, rose to the occasion and practically cooked the lunch, a *chaud froid* from Gunter being thrown in. The flowers could not be improved; Sophy always had exquisite flowers exquisitely arranged, and she had a rather pleasing sense of bustle that morning in putting finishing touches to them and to other details.

It was 1.30—and they were to lunch at a quarter to two—when Frank heard himself called as he emerged from his study.

“What do you want, Sophy? I must go and change——”

“Oh, just one moment,” said Sophy. “I wish you could tell me something about Sir Walter’s wife. Is she alive?”

“Yes, I believe so.” Frank’s tone was preoccupied.

“Then they were divorced, or separated, or what happened? Why is she not on the scene?”

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"I'm almost sure it was not a divorce," said Frank a little impatiently—he was late and wanted to change his things—"or everybody in India must have known about it. I gathered that they were separated, but his secretary had an idea that they wrote to each other at Christmas. No one I knew out there, was clear about it."

"All right," said Sophy; "only it is always safer to know, isn't it?"

But Frank had left the room before her words were finished.

Walter Middleton came first, and found Sophy alone. She had only seen him three times since he came to London, but on each of the occasions when they had met she had liked him particularly. His manner to women was a little old-fashioned and deferential—a touch too ceremonious, perhaps—but it suited well with his strong, handsome face, and sad, earnest eyes. It is the manner that betrays the man's belief that

women and men live in different spheres, and almost on different moral planes. It implies difference and reserve; whereas the modern man's manner implies a belief in similarity and sympathy of tastes and thoughts in all civilised beings without regard to sex. Society is far more agreeable with such a modern manner in the ascendant, but from time to time the other is stimulating and somewhat flattering, and Sophy, a feminine little person, certainly liked it.

Frank joined them, and he and Sir Walter at once showed their pleasure at being together, but Sophy noticed, by infinitesimal signs, that Frank was not really quite himself; he seemed a little distracted, and at the same time a little excited.

Lady Cromleigh came late—moving hastily, covered in gorgeous furs, with more colour than usual in her cheeks, and with a bright look in her eyes, which almost

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flashed in the sunlight. It was one of the days on which she might be supposed to be a young woman, as well as a beautiful one. Talking fast about herself, and what had made her late, she gave her firm, friendly grasp with the little, square hand to host and hostess. Just as Sophy was about to introduce Sir Walter, who had not moved from the moment the visitor was announced, to her surprise Lady Cromleigh walked across to him. She covered him with her smiling welcome.

"We have not met for ages," she said, and then turned from him at once, and only Sophy noticed the change in his face, as he raised his head after a low and ceremonious bow.

Was it temper, or displeasure, or was it that he was in physical pain? She had heard that he still suffered from the effects of his illness.

Still talking about herself, Lady Crom-

leigh walked into the little dining-room down stairs, and took a seat with her back to the window—"on account of my eyes."

Sophy, whose complexion could have faced the strongest light without looking less like that of a pink-and-white china marquise, cheerfully put herself opposite her guest.

Sir Walter and Frank sat down facing each other. Those two had not made friends on the ground of similarity. The physical difference emphasised the moral one. Frank—small, delicate, more active than healthy—was in every way mobile and responsive; while Middleton was powerfully built and a little slow to move, intellectually and physically. Even the smile which started from his heavily lidded eyes crept slowly to his mouth. Then he had large, massive bones, and after all it is the bones that make the weight.

Lunch, except in the matter of food, certainly did not go on very well. For once,

Sophy was disappointed in Frank as a host. She was accustomed to a vivid appearance of enjoyment in their guests, which she rightly thought to be due to Frank's gift for making little things seem worth while. Then he was so very rarely the least bit stupid. But to-day he did not appear to see that Middleton was not responding to Lady Cromleigh's advances. Indeed, it seemed to Sophy that she was positively making a frontal attack on the other guest, to which he was apparently unresponsive.

Sophy felt cross when for the fourth or fifth time Lady Cromleigh appealed to Sir Walter for an opinion, and he, after the briefest answer, turned again to his hostess.

Frank each time had left Lady Cromleigh to digest what almost amounted to a snub, without doing anything to divert her attention. At last, with an almost imperceptible shrug, she turned to him, and asked how the new secretary was getting on.

"She is still in possession, but we no longer allude to the typewriter or to shorthand."

"But then what do you do?"

"Well, we have very interesting talks about literature, and how novels should be written—we are studying the art of fiction, and trying to make out whether it is an art that can be reduced to law. Then she does a great deal of copying, in a beautiful handwriting which is uncommonly hard to read. But chiefly she reads aloud what I have done, with comments, and I am making extensive alterations."

"She will quite spoil his book," said Sophy, in a moment's pause in her talk with Sir Walter.

"It is slowly but surely getting under way for complete reconstruction," said Frank.

"Isn't it preposterous?" said Sophy.

"It is very amusing," said Lady Cromleigh.

"It is extremely interesting, I can assure you," said Frank.

Then they told Sir Walter of Frank's plight in having acquired this job secretary in place of the eminently competent Miss Archiefield.

"But why don't you get rid of her?" said Middleton. Sophy fancied he was glad of the turn taken by the conversation, which left to him the rôle of listener.

"Sir Walter has never seen her, or he would not ask," said Lady Cromleigh; and Frank and Sophy laughed.

Neither of the Norburys noticed that, at the same moment as she spoke those words, Lady Cromleigh became quite suddenly pale, and a little shiver passed through her. Her eye caught Sir Walter Middleton's glance of distant but polite enquiry.

"No, I am not really cold," she said; "only somebody is walking over my grave."

She gave herself a slight shake and turned to Sophy.

"Have you had any explanation from the lady who sent you this charmer?"

"Yes, I had a letter this morning from Miss Farley—rather apologetic, for having sent us Mrs. Carstairs, of whom she knows very little. But she says that the girl she meant us to have is now free. She had let Mrs. Carstairs know from the first that she would probably only be wanted for a few days, but——" Sophy turned to Lady Cromleigh in a mock appeal for sympathy. "I have not even told this to Frank yet. I knew it would be of no use."

"Certainly not. Another change now would make me positively giddy. Besides, it interests me very much to see how the book is changing."

"Tell us," said Lady Cromleigh.

"Well, the first change is an omission. It is really impossible to make a lady read

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aloud things that cause her to blush, and this one blushes so fearfully easily."

"You are too funny," said Lady Cromleigh.

"Well, I had, near the opening of my story, an episode, rather a charming little thing I thought, that had given me a good deal of trouble—an idyllic episode in my heroine's early youth. I had one rather like it in my first book."

"I remember 'Lilah,'" said Lady Cromleigh. And, indeed, it was the admiration of the critics for the manner and style in which this episode was told which had given Frank Norbury his first success and his present pleasant position in the literary world.

Frank bowed.

"I venture to think this was better. However, it is condemned."

"Norbury, you are ridiculous," said Middleton, crossing his legs and moving his

chair a little aside from the table, as he knocked the ash off his cigarette.

Frank went on speaking in a voice of amused self-defence.

“So now I am making my heroine a woman who never dreamt of love before she met her husband; and I mean to get her on the rack when she thinks it conceivable that he can possibly like somebody else better than herself.”

It was obvious that Sophy could now move if she wished to do so, and she did not feel at all disposed to indulge Frank by their sitting any longer round the table while he talked about his work, concerning which he was usually so reticent. She hoped that the subject would be left behind in the dining-room.

VI

WHEN they got upstairs, Lady Cromleigh stood in front of the fire, while Sophy sat down on a sofa within reach of the warm blaze. Sir Walter Middleton took a chair close to her. Frank, who had been called to the telephone in the hall, joined them as they were beginning to discuss the verses of a very new, rather minor poet. He came forward with his quick, light step and stood by Lady Cromleigh on the big, white hearth rug. To Sophy's surprise, he went on with the subject of his book as if there had been no interruption, or rather as if the company present were only waiting for him to continue it at once.

"It will really be very interesting," he said, "to see how my charming young heroine behaves on the rack. I assure you

that we shall not spare her. A tighter turn of the screw is applied if she seems in the least easier in her mind."

Lady Cromleigh gave a short laugh.

"Does the husband behave so very badly?"

"Atrociously, from our point of view, but not, you know, in any way that would count in a divorce court."

There was silence for a moment, and Sophy thought that Frank had much better drop the subject; it was really stupid to insist on talking shop like this in his own house where he must be listened to. But before she could think of any happy interruption, he was off again in an attitude of narrative, as if he had been asked to tell a story and meant to do it.

He spoke directly to Lady Cromleigh, who sat down on a low stool and was warming her hands, while her eyes were fixed on the fire as she listened.

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“But my heroine thinks his conduct too appalling for words, and I am awfully sorry for her”—Frank flicked off the end of his cigarette with his little finger as he spoke—“because she evidently thinks the world is coming to an end. Her marriage has been to her the most glorious and exquisite of human things. There had never been anything quite like it before; it is a trail of glory in a fallen, earthly world. It seemed amazing that such a thing should have happened—it almost suggested doubts as to whether Providence could be just, who allowed such a joy only to a few fortunate human beings. It was all so lovely, this life of theirs, and so supremely good. It seemed to her that all really happily married couples were like the stars in the firmament, who shone out reassuringly, saying, ‘Here we are,’ in the first days of Creation.”

As he spoke, Sophy looked at him with puzzled eyes. She could not understand

what he was talking about, and she thought Sir Walter was frowning.

Lady Cromleigh kicked the poker.

"Go on," she said, in a dry little voice which sounded bored. But Frank flowed on.

"Well, you can imagine what it is when the first dark cloud appears in such a high blue heaven."

He was absolutely absorbed now in the thought of his work. He wanted to know whether they agreed with him, especially if the women agreed as to its truth.

"Well, then there comes pretty quickly the appalling sense of failure, of destruction, of glory soiled and ideals trampled upon. Her world of joy and hope is being destroyed. We let her feel this to the marrow of her bones. We make her have the growing sense of the cruelty inflicted on something frightfully personal and intimate, which becomes exposed and has no

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power of resistance. There is intrusion into her innermost sacred places, into fold within fold of the soul; and there is a new knowledge of the awful vitality of the soul, of which she had been almost unconscious until now. But is it not strange that desertion seems to be intrusion? Can you analyse it?"

He was looking down at Lady Cromleigh, whose eyes were still fixed on the fire.

"I suppose," said Lady Cromleigh slowly, without looking up, "that it was the intrusion of another person—the other woman in short. And that third person would raise questions. For instance, she might begin to wonder how much your heroine minded."

"And the other woman would enjoy her minding, wouldn't she?" queried Frank.

"Oh, no," cried Lady Cromleigh with sudden warmth; and Frank, looking down, saw her upturned face curiously excited.

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Then she laughed lightly and turned back again to the fire.

"Keep your attention on your heroine, the other woman is of no consequence."

"But she must be of consequence. I meant her to be of immense consequence. Only, in the reconstruction, she is getting fainter."

"Anyhow," persisted Lady Cromleigh, "it is about the real heroine that you are telling us."

He could not doubt of her interest in his story, and her interest roused him still more. But he had a slight qualm as to the other guest.

"Does it bore you?" he asked Sir Walter.

Middleton seemed to come back from a great distance.

"Bore me? No." He said it with such emphasis that Sophy was startled. There are many other sensations, she reflected, that are disagreeable besides being bored.

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She could have shaken Frank, as he went on in the same tone of narrative.

“Laura—my heroine, I mean—is not angry, you know, except at moments, and she has also at moments a sort of odd detached interest in the concerns of the other two. Sometimes she says to herself how beautiful the other woman is, how natural that he should admire her, and she feels frightfully sorry for her husband. Now, does that seem normal?”

“I can’t say it does,” said Lady Cromleigh.

“But I don’t allow her many of those detached, ethereal moments. She has to get through the time when she feels that she is becoming almost repulsive to him, and when he lets drop odd, rough bits of personal criticism and of blame. It’s then that it is agony to her to suppose that he still thinks she cares for him; that he is revolting from the love he still believes her to

have. But then, as she tries to keep down any morbid pride a worse depth opens before her."

Frank leant on the mantelpiece and dropped his voice. He was full of artistic emotion, and he felt unconsciously as if the others were the same—there seemed to his imagination to be something tense in Lady Cromleigh's bent shoulders, and Walter Middleton's stillness, and in Sophy's anxious face.

"Laura begins to be afraid," he concluded, "that she is herself ceasing to love him."

A moment's silence followed, and then Sir Walter rose suddenly.

"I must be off," he said to Mrs. Norbury. "I have an appointment in the city."

Then he moved towards Lady Cromleigh. She rose quite upright from her low seat, and held out her hand. Sophy thought that there was something daring

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in her way of looking at him. It seemed to say, that it would be absurd to take him and things in general too seriously.

"Curiously interesting for our first meeting after all these years, wasn't it?" she said; and then she gave a low, quick laugh.

To Sophy's surprise, Sir Walter Middleton answered by asking a little ceremoniously if he might go and see Lady Cromleigh on Sunday. She had expected Lady Cromleigh to invite, not Sir Walter to ask permission.

When Frank and Sophy were left alone, it needed all her self-control not to tell him what she thought of his choice of a subject in Sir Walter Middleton's company, and his manner of insisting on it in the talk that had just passed. He did not notice what was for her a very marked silence; he was evidently still absorbed in his own thoughts. At last she said quietly:

"Frank, did you tell Sir Walter that Lady Cromleigh would be here to-day?"

"I don't know, I can't remember," he answered, a little impatiently.

Sophy took up the *Morning Post* and tried to distract herself. Frank was so odd and unlike himself; as a rule they always had a pleasant, critical chat when visitors left them. She told herself that it was because she was not well that she was unreasonably depressed by details. For some days now she had been fighting against a sense of tired depression.

It was Frank who next broke the silence.

"I shall go for a walk," he said, more to himself than to her, and he left the room without looking round.

VII

BUT Frank had hardly shut the front door, with a bang that was heard in the drawing-room by the sad and justly irritated lady sitting there, before he owned to himself that he had just made himself a dreadful bore.

"I hardly let Middleton speak a word, and Lady Cromleigh evidently wanted to discuss the Zenana question with him. He takes so long to get under way now. I can't make him out, and he looks beastly cross. But anyhow I ought not to have let myself talk on like that." He sighed. At the moment he was suffering from the reaction that follows imaginative obsession. He had been in the grip of his work for days, delighting in the strange process of production. Now this sense of having made a

mistake, and the irritation he felt at having confided so much of his beloved book to others, grew rapidly. It seemed to him that he had been absurd, and then he began to feel that he was making far too much of the ideas he had felt so beautiful and living two hours before. And that doubt of what he loved so much was positive pain. He needed the relief of physical exercise.

It was too late to go to play golf now, so there was nothing for it but a long, hard walk. In the evening, as he crossed Hampstead Heath by the Vale of Health, and the million lights shone below in the unusually clear wintry atmosphere, the depression had passed. The vision of the past week came back to him, pervaded him, walked beside him; and the vision took the form of a woman with trailing garments, soft, golden hair and very dark eyes. Perhaps he first owned to himself on that walk that the whole meaning of the book to him, its

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unity, its beauty, depended on whether he could put into it quite truly and quite alive the personality of his job secretary. He had not only to understand her as she was now, but to understand her as she had been years ago; and when did ever artist gaze with more despair at the living woman whose beauty must be transferred on to the dead canvas, than Frank felt at the thought of attempting in words to make alive the girl that was now Mrs. Carstairs? And, curiously enough, his model was becoming his teacher. Mrs. Carstairs would reiterate that the ideal must be sought in the real, not in notions or abstractions; and so, following her own advice, he was seeking in her present self for her past youth. If the soft hair strayed, if the cloak were cast aside, and some free, graceful movement showed the lines of the figure; if some little joke, and they had a good many little jokes now, brought out a girlish laugh—all

those things were infinitely precious to him. He was seeking, as he had never sought before, for individuality, for the secret of a personality. She had told him in so many words that his work hitherto had been too decorative to be individual; and outside individuality, she insisted, you would never surprise the secret of life. Well, then, he was obeying her; and, in the absorption of his work, he did not as yet ask himself if there were any danger of her suspecting whose individuality it was that he was studying. She herself never raised the question of the morality of portraiture in fiction, or even of its good taste; and at present he unconsciously kept it out of his mind. He was seeking for truth, penetrating with intense eagerness into the veins of precious things he found in his quest, but scrupulously anxious not to mistake things shining and exquisite to look at for pure gold. Thus, when he told her ideas to

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other people, as he had to-day, he was testing them with the artist's indifference to all but their value as added truth in the picture.

One thing occasionally disturbed him seriously. The more hopeful he became that this living being was going to be alive in his pages, the more worried he was at the lifelessness of the rest of the characters. He was not quite certain yet as to the whole of his plot, though it was shaping with the growth of his heroine. But the man he could not see at all. If he were to be a bad man, how easy it would be! But Mrs. Carstairs would not allow the man to be bad. He was not conscious of the absurdity of his obedience to her. If, indeed, he had had a living bad man in his mind's furniture he might have gone his own way, but he had not. It seemed to him that the man must be found somehow, and he was trying to find him as he walked down the sterile

spaciousness of Fitzjohn's Avenue. "A man of action," they had both thought it must be. His mind had turned to a military type, but somehow that had been discarded. A good man—that was the crux. The man who put the woman on the rack, and kept her on it, a good man! Frank had protested. Mrs. Carstairs had turned from the table. She always liked now to be near the typewriter, as a sort of reminder that she was ready to use it. She had turned towards him with a strange, wan little smile that held a delicate sarcasm.

"They do do it."

"Good men rack women!" cried Frank.

"Oh, yes," she said, in a little voice that fluttered. "And it is when they are good men that they hurt most."

Frank reflected afterwards that her manner and what she said were of no use for the picture of the girl Mrs. Carstairs had once been. Manner and words were too

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mature, too experienced; but it was an experience that had brought no real cynicism. This maturity had been born of pity and knowledge together, and surely such are the qualities that overcome the world. But the good man who could rack a woman, how was he to be found? Do good people sometimes commit very vile actions? But after all, had any one committed a much viler action than the psalmist himself? Was that what Mrs. Carstairs meant? Well, he must ask her that question.

VIII

THAT night, after Sophy had gone to bed, Frank was in his study, when Sir Walter Middleton came in for a smoke. Frank had more than once asked him to come in in this way. To-night, however, he was not in the mood for him. His appearance recalled to Frank his annoyance with his own stupidity in boring his guests at luncheon, and also he was in a happy mood of imagination and did not want to be disturbed. He was planning a chapter in which Laura was to go to pray in a beautiful church. "She will tell me what she is to say herself," he thought; and meanwhile he was making the setting. The hour and its lights and shades had to be settled; the deep gloom and the jewelled space of stained glass were very evident to him. He had

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forgotten for the moment his chief worry, because, as Laura was to have the chapter to herself, the man was not a necessity in it. Then in came Sir Walter Middleton. He was an intrusion in the room that seemed to Frank to be filled with the presence of Mrs. Carstairs.

Middleton sat down in the big leather chair, his long legs stretched across the hearth rug, and Frank, to avoid them, gathered his short ones under him like a Turk, a favourite attitude of his.

"I've just come from the House of Commons," said Middleton—"hearing the most preposterous stuff about the north of India."

"Ah," said Frank. "I can't conceive of anything more irritating."

"Not even the society of Lady Cromleigh?" said Middleton, with a gruff laugh.

Frank looked up with real interest. Middleton was undoubtedly a handsome man, with a certain intensity in his moods.

He was old-fashioned in having more manner in the company of women than of men. When alone with men he was a little easier, and a very little rougher.

"I'm awfully sorry I did not know you did not like her when we asked her to meet you here."

"Oh, that made no difference. It was bound to be. Kismet—it is kismet." He smiled sarcastically.

"But then, why did you ask her if you might go and see her?"

"Well, to be perfectly frank, do not people say that she intends to marry Lord Pentonville?"

"Oh, yes," said Norbury.

"Well, then, how can I risk having her bad word, when I very particularly intend to be sent by him to another post in another climate?"

"Do you positively dislike her?"

"I do," said Middleton, "very positively

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dislike her. I knew her years ago, and she did me much mischief. How she has changed! Could you believe that she was lovely, positively lovely?"

"Of course," said Frank. "She has got very beautiful things in her face now."

"Beautiful now! Why, I saw her driving in the Park a few days ago, and she looked like a hag!"

"But that's only at moments. She brightens up in the most amazing way."

"I fancy she must take opium," said Sir Walter mercilessly. "They get that haggard look and they brighten up like that." His thoughts were evidently wandering from Lady Cromleigh. "Your talk at lunch interested me," he said.

"My dear fellow," cried Norbury, "I've been tortured with remorse ever since. I made myself an infernal bore."

"No, it did not bore me. It interested me to see how you work up a book. When

I try to write history I always wish I had a constructive imagination. While you are talking as you did to-day I suppose you seem to see the people as vividly or more vividly than with your bodily eyes?"

"Not all of them. I wish I could. I see the heroine in this book and I did think I saw the other woman, but I can't for the life of me see the man."

"You are only taking the woman's point of view, you know," pronounced Middleton.

"Perhaps," said Frank. He was afraid of letting himself go. He felt as if he must keep his obsession in order.

"Now you must think out your man. To begin with, he has evidently made a very happy marriage, or the wife——" He stopped for a moment to give himself a whiskey-and-soda. "I say she could not have those special ideas about marriage if she had been in love with a scamp. She

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might have found him fascinating, but she would not have thought of their union in the sight of God and His angels as a thing of wonder. Therefore what you said of her ideas shows that he was not a scamp. I believe it shows that he had a very high ideal of marriage and a very great devotion to her." Sir Walter's voice was argumentative, but it was something else too. Frank looked at him with growing interest. He had always felt that there was electricity concealed in Middleton's slow-moving strength.

"Thus I construct from what you said that the position was one of great, of unusual happiness, perhaps. I hazard this also, that it was just a little too domestic. I mean that perhaps—mind, I only suggest a possibility—that this couple put rather a strain on the ideal, lived, let us say, too quietly, just because they thought they could need nothing more while they already had so

much. Well—it may, don't you think, have become a little monotonous? Man, my dear Frank"—Walter smiled, and cast the end of his cigar into the fire—"man is worldly and ambitious. He may, too, have a tendency to depression which needs variety—it is not only frivolous women in French novels who absolutely need variety. Well then, suppose some one to come on the scene who excites his worldliness, his ambitions, and at the same time satisfies his hankering after variety and colour. Remember, there is, besides the mighty romance that makes for joy, a lower romance in this world that makes for pleasure. I have even felt its decorative value in your own writings. Thus you must own to a temptation."

Walter Middleton rose, and the room seemed lower; he strode across it, and it seemed narrower.

"But it could never excuse cruelty to such a woman," protested Frank.

"No," said Middleton, as if delivering a very solemn and decisive judgment on an offender. "No, there is no real excuse. But my contention is that you must see the man's point of view to make your book real. Shall I stop?"

"No, no. Please go on. You are helping me very much."

"That is, of course, what I want to do," Walter answered with an odd little laugh. "You must understand, then, that the essence of such a position is that the man believes that this excitement is not interfering with his affection for his wife. In the first stage he locks up his most sacred places, and goes out to amuse himself. The sacred things, his deepest affections, he knows are under lock and key, and he would be very angry if it were suggested that he was showing them the least disrespect. That is stage number one." He sat down again and gazed silently into the fire.

“But when he sees that his wonderful wife is suffering——?”

“And do you suppose she has so far let him see how she is suffering? Norbury, that is a stupid comment, unworthy of you. A wise woman ignores—and oh, how wisely—the first threatening of worse things; and, if circumstances and other people allow, very often the threatening passes off, the illness is arrested. In the case you are describing, unfortunately it was not arrested. But now suppose we go further. We have suggested the temptation of a restless, ambitious man, who naturally craved for excitement and variety. The next stage of the story, if it is to become a tragedy, is often determined by pity. That’s a marked difference between men and women. A man flirts for a time and then pities, and pity is the thickest of his illusions. He pities the other woman for an unkind husband, or because she dislikes a kind hus-

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band, or because she is bored by her mother, or because she finds life dull. Perhaps he pities her so much that, when he begins to discover that his wife is in pain, his pity is all engaged elsewhere, and then he becomes angry because his wife's pain is an accusation, and an unjust one. For has he not convinced himself that his deepest affections are safely secured all the time? Again, his wife's pain is an accusation against the other woman, for whom he is already full of pity; it seems the last straw, this view his wife takes of her. Norbury, you must allow that I am not simply retained on behalf of the man. Now see how all sorts of brutal, usual, low, worldly views and ideas about his wife being jealous, and how women treat each other, begin to show their ugly heads. When he has reached this stage he is in a very bad way indeed, and may God preserve them both."

He was silent for some moments.

"But I think these low ideas about his wife appear to her to be more actual than they really are; they are movements of impatience, finding vent in falling back on the common, base, human tradition. It is very external. Well, what I maintain is this, Norbury, that even in these depths the sacred places may be still safe. Unhallowed things are on the very steps of the sacred precincts; but if the past were as truly pure and great as you indicated it to be, it may be saved. Good God!" he cried suddenly, "it may be in possession, in fearfully strong possession. I have seen men whose lives have been haunted, darkened, by the fact that they could not get rid of a happy past."

Frank Norbury was absorbed in the reception of Middleton's ideas, fitting them to his own story, unconscious of anything but his own needs. The point that he especially dwelt on was the stage when the

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man became angry with his wife for not understanding the position of the other woman. This was a monstrous notion, it seemed to Norbury, that the wife ought to see the pathetic view of the other woman, and that she was put in the wrong for want of tenderness and sympathy for the very woman who was the cause of her torture.

There had been a moment's silence.

"It is partly, I suppose," said Frank, "that he is unconsciously seeking occasion against her—he wants to put her in the wrong. He is, I imagine, even annoyed by her beauty—by all that held him before. He would like to think her ugly and heartless if he could. Much of it, surely, is the cruelty of power and guilt against innocence."

Middleton started. What Frank said had not penetrated at once. Then a dark red colour rose in the deeply sunburnt cheeks. He made a sudden movement, and checked himself.

“But then, think,” Frank went on, “what all that means to her. Wounded, horribly suffering, she is not even allowed the dignity of suffering. Conceive a woman of an intensely high ideal and exquisite sensitiveness, exposed defenceless to all the mean cruelty and spite, the ‘low, old world views’ that make her position pitiful, even ridiculous. She is put in the wrong. I think that this, to a woman, is one of the worst elements in her pain; and, as she loves him, he can put her in the wrong. His judgment has such enormous influence with her. What he thinks penetrates her thoughts, and so she loses confidence in herself—loses the pride that his love had given her. She knows that she is criticised; the intimate citadel of her very innermost self is attacked. Middleton, how can a man do such things?”

Walter Middleton gave a harsh laugh.

“But Norbury, is it not what men do

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every day—otherwise good, honourable men? Your own marriage is, of course, an exception.”

Frank started. His own marriage was so very far from his thoughts; it seemed entirely irrelevant.

“There is a chapter in history that you might well write in your present mood,” Middleton continued,—“‘the neglected wives and the neglected husbands of the historic love affairs of mankind.’ But mind,” again the dull red colour rose in his face, “we are not now talking of actual, deliberate actions. If I understood what you told us to-day, the man in your book does not run away with the other woman—does not commit what the world calls sin.”

“No,” said Frank. “It is a treason of the mind and the heart and the will. Probably he would have gone all the way if circumstances had offered the opportunity.”

“Who can ever say of anyone that he

would not have gone all the way, if circumstances had been different?" asked Sir Walter in a stern voice. "You must not condemn a man for what might have been."

"Anyhow, to a woman it must be as intolerable."

"She has no right to think so."

"No right, when all the best of what was promised to her is taken away? What is the husk?"

"It is the form into which life may come back," said Sir Walter in a low voice. "She has no right to pronounce it a corpse. On her lies the duty of interpretation."

"Then she is to sit by in torture?"

"She must wait," said Sir Walter. "In that lies the secret of fidelity. They do it—many women do it. They keep the savour of the salt of life. The dull, uninteresting men and women who wait are living the divine life. God waits for us all."

"I can follow you if you mean that they

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wait from religious motives, and have the return all good religious people expect in the next world. But how can it be any good to wait in this world for the leavings of a man's heart? No woman could care to have the wretched leavings of such an affection."

"You don't understand, Norbury. It is not the wretched leavings and the dregs that she waits for. It is the holiest and best part of a man. It is his soul that is in keeping for her if she will but wait—if she will but interpret mercifully that horrible human weakness. But if she will not? Do you see what it may mean? It may mean that in the darkest hour of his life, the moment when he most needs help and guidance—when he is trying to rise up, trying to fight, perhaps, and beginning to look to her for help—she leaves him to despair."

"But how," cried Frank in exasperation, "can you expect her at the very moment of

cruelty—triumphant cruelty, for it is evident that the other woman returned his feelings—how can you expect her to go on giving herself as a living sacrifice to the torturers? It seems to me almost wrong; it is a degree of self-degradation that must injure her almost incurably.” And Frank little realised, while he was speaking, that he was at that moment almost as much the echo of a woman’s feelings as if he had been a medium.

“No,” said Walter firmly. “Your psychology is wrong there. Mind you, nature has enormous powers of healing. She acts on large lines. She is merciless as to detail when she is cruel, but if the main dictates of duty are followed in spite of suffering, she will be as tender in healing when the spring has come again. If only a man or a woman is faithful, deeply faithful, he or she will have the forces of natural law and the blessing of heaven for support.”

A clock somewhere outside the house struck two, but they did not hear it.

"Where have we got to?" asked Frank. "You began by urging me to see the man's point of view, but we turned too quickly, I think, to the question of whether the woman ought to endure. You would help me more if you would make the man's position clearer to me!"

"The whole thing is absurd," said Middleton. "What is the use of talking to you? Either you have experienced what it means to a man or you have not. You are so cultivated and civilised and gentle and comfortable, Norbury, I doubt if you could understand. But what, as an artist, you should grasp is this. The man who knows passion for a time may have the inner citadel of his soul, if not safe, at least capable of recovery. Such a marriage as you describe would hold the depths of a man's nature, and, the fever past, he would turn

again to the ideal he had lost in his delirium. I don't feel even quite sure that the attraction a certain brute force in a man has for some women is not an instinct. The strong man has a power of retaining his ideal, of holding on to his ideal, that is often unknown to the man who has no trouble with his passions."

Then Middleton's manner changed; it became the excellent manner of the diplomat and governor. He was again like the Middleton who had been Norbury's host in India.

"How entrancing your work must be!" He lit a cigarette as he spoke. "Here have I been drawn into the atmosphere and getting as excited as you do yourself. The air is tense with our feelings. But I suppose it takes a good deal out of you? By the way, I meant to bring you an article of mine on a view I hold strongly on that matter of Thomas Gregory and the Indian

Council. Would it bore you to look it over?"

"It would interest me very much," said Frank vaguely.

His companion had watched him while he spoke with keen, shrewd eyes. He seemed satisfied by his inspection and soon took himself away. "It was a foolish impulse to go and see him while these thoughts were filling my mind, and——"

"I said several foolish things," he repeated to himself as he made his way to Belgrave Mansions. "But I really believe it was as safe as talking to a somnambulist."

IX

HAPPINESS, joy and pleasure are difficult to differentiate. I had nearly said that these were among the happiest days of Frank Norbury's life, but I am not certain if the curious artistic delight and exaltation of these days should be described as happiness. Certainly all the conscious part of him was satisfied—was filled as with intoxication. He had never before lived so completely in his work, and although there were the damp, dull moments inevitable to the life of the imagination, these were few and far between.

He and Sophy had never spent much time together, and he did not notice how very little he saw of her now. A smile when they met, a touch of comradeship in manner, an appreciation of her latest bit

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of gossip and her way of telling it, even these details, that usually filled up the moments they spent together, were diminished almost to nothing. He did think, once or twice, that Sophy was bored when he spoke of his book and she was usually keenly interested in his work. Now, if he talked of it, her eyes seemed to stray; and once he asked her why she looked tired and did not know that he had not waited for an answer.

After that talk with Walter Middleton he began to find the man in his book a little more alive, and in doing so he became conscious that it was emphatically necessary to know more of the other woman in the plot. The influence of the critic seated daily at his writing-table made him increasingly anxious to avoid abstract notions. Hitherto he would have attacked this question of the man's temptation and passion in what he felt now to be a "notional" method; he would have talked of

sex, and primitive man, and of nature. Then he would have tried to give the most beautiful setting in colour, in form, in variety, in the rich, deep, twilight atmosphere of a wood in the afterglow. But now he sought dimly, with a sense of unskilled perceptions, with a new humility, after the secrets of individuality. How could he enter into this temptation if he had no conception of the temptress? What was it in this woman that made her become the second woman in his hero's life, when there must have been other women, probably several, quite as beautiful, who might have become the "second woman"?

Mrs. Carstairs found him one morning in search of the other woman. She came in late and a little breathless, for she had got into the wrong omnibus. She was hardly conscious even now of how much kindly, chivalrous assistance on the part of conductors and passengers had been neces-

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sary before she reached the right turning out of Piccadilly.

He gave her his usual really delightful smile, but he was a little abstracted all the same.

She settled herself at the table, after discarding some of her heavier draperies, and began to open a portfolio.

"I copied out the whole chapter last night," and she handed to him a roll of foolscap, as usual delicately tied up in blue ribbon. He knew so well now, without undoing it, how exquisite the copy would look and how very hard it would be to decipher. But it was only by carrying on this fiction, that the copies were immensely useful, that he could attempt to keep her. He was artful in his arrangement of her work, giving her things obviously not in sequence, and then explaining that the missing parts were not finished. It was his dread that she should discover that those missing bits

were a reconstruction of Mary Carstairs as a girl, based on portraiture of her present self. He no longer wished to know her age. It did not matter whether it were thirty or forty, or midway between the two. The whole arrangement of her hair and her bonnet—for he was sure now that it was some sort of a bonnet—and the veil, or veils, (he thought there were several,) might have been worn appropriately by a woman of sixty. But yet, how they became her at the moments when her face looked exquisitely young! Even at the less happy moments, when her curious incapacity for dealing with a material world, which was full of omnibuses going in different directions, and in which florins felt the same size as pennies, made her tired and discouraged, she never looked haggard, like Lady Cromleigh for instance. She only became more transparent, more delicate, more blue under the eyes. It was then he thought

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that it would not really matter if she were forty.

"I can't see the other woman," said Frank, a little fretfully.

"Can't you?" asked Mrs. Carstairs, in a voice of the deepest sympathy. "No, you have not got her yet. I was thinking of that late last night. I have an idea of her though, I think. Don't you mean her to be full of vitality—a sort of rich, full effect? I caught that idea. I felt that Laura might feel a little shadowy by her side. The other woman had, I think, a hunger, a sort of craving for life. I think her besetting sin was curiosity. She knew it herself; she knew a great deal about herself. She had *la grande curiosité*, the great wish for knowledge, but she had very small curiosities too. She did not wish for evil, but she wanted the knowledge of evil as well as of good. With this sort of craving for experience, she had the face of a child, moulded like a

child's, admirably rounded. She reversed the usual rule that the eyes conceal and the mouth betrays. You know the saying, that God gives us our eyes, but we make our own mouths. Reverse that for your 'other woman.' Her mouth was always enchanting. But when the evil element was awake in her, the eyes betrayed it. Yet there was a real womanly element in her that I think must always have saved her. Only, when she got to Heaven, she would want to have a day out now and then."

She was silent; and Frank, watching her intensely, said almost under his breath:

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough to start you?" asked Mrs. Carstairs. Then after a moment's hesitation, "I don't think the other woman's beauty could wear well. But she was not at all sensitive, and that preserves some women. She did not mind being disliked. Indeed, I think she positively enjoyed being

unpopular. She felt it a tribute. Her whole treatment of life came from the idea that you must trample on others or be trampled on yourself. There was a fascination in her courage to the few whom she did not trample on."

"Then how could she suffer?" asked Frank anxiously. "Everybody must suffer somewhere and somehow."

"Ah, she could suffer, she would suffer, from an unquenchable, devouring thirst! She would seize fruit after fruit out of those offered to her, and throw each away half eaten. She was in a fierce hurry, even as a girl. I remember— Oh!" she suddenly cried. "This is absurd. I must not get excited like this. I shall begin to feel as if all the book were real." She became extraordinarily white. Frank recognised the moment of danger. She must not get on to that question of reality, or it would all be up. He laughed. His laugh was his

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smile developed. It had in it the same sympathy and kindliness.

"No, no," he said. "You are tired. I have felt that same delusion when I was overworked. I woke up once thinking that I was staying in the house belonging to one of my characters. It was a warning not to get too tired."

"Oh, thank you. I am a little tired. I think I sat up too late last night. May I have some copying to do now?"

Frank gave her a chapter and wisely left her alone. For the rest of that morning he left her to her weird mechanical work, while he walked up and down, up and down, by the water in St. James' Park. He had found the other woman, and he was fitting her to the man. Had not Sir Walter Middleton suggested that a very happy marriage might lead to monotony and that the animal called man wanted variety? He seized on this observation and worked it

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well. The other woman had been exactly the person to excite discontent, and to fascinate the discontented—say a man with a slightly melancholy temperament. Such a woman would rouse him so thoroughly. Some men and some women cannot endure monotony. This woman would have hated monotony as almost loathsome. Ah! he began to understand now. His ideal, his heroine, was perhaps not anxious to be amused, finding the joy of life in very simple things, satisfied with ideals and not needing distractions, perhaps despising them. And the sad and frivolous elements in the latter-day man made Frank feel for the other two. Joy can afford to be serious, happiness can bear monotony, but sadness must have pleasure. He saw, too, that this is often even truer of the man of action than of the thinker. The nature that is strung up to action demands relaxation.

He went home less entirely a blind and

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passionate defender of his heroine than he went out. He began to have a glimmering notion of the influence of the other woman.

X

It was a few days later. Mrs. Carstairs was copying, and her employer looking over some MSS.

"Mrs. Carstairs, did Laura have a child, do you think? It is quite extraordinary that I have not thought about it before. I think I should like her to be a mother, but of course it is more tragic if she is not."

"I think she would have suffered more in the position in which you put her in your book, with a child than without one."

"Impossible!" cried Frank. "Why, without a child her loneliness would have been too awful for words. A child—surely a child would have made all the difference?"

"Yes, all the difference in the world," said Mrs. Carstairs very slowly, "but not

by preventing pain. I can't analyse it, Mr. Norbury, but you see it must add to the suffering." She stopped altogether. Frank looked at her anxiously. He often felt now that he was walking on thin ice at unexpected places. Then she drew up her head as if determining to cast some thought aside.

"You know," she said, "how afraid I am of looking at things from a notional standpoint. I would rather you thought for yourself whether the woman in your book is a mother or not."

Frank almost blushed, and then, looking full at the beautiful face before him, seeing the mild completeness of the deep, brown eyes, he decided that the face had not the hunger of childlessness; it had rather to him the pathos of Providence, the element of the divine that is not creative but preservative.

"I think we will give Laura a child," he

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said very gently with an amused smile. "But I wonder if we ought to be cruel. I am sure that she had a child, but do you think she may have lost it?" Frank had the cold-blooded touch of the scientific investigator when he said that.

"No, no," said Mrs. Carstairs angrily. "No. That I really can't allow." Her voice was imperious and her manner haughty. "Oh! I beg your pardon. How absurd! But I can't—I cannot stand the death of a child in any book."

"Very well," answered the author meekly. "There is a child and it is living, but I own that in my humble opinion the book loses in unity and in pathos."

"Try — try it," urged the secretary. "Think of her and what her home has been to her, the perfection of the life of those three. Think what it is to her to have failed so completely. It would be like a great general who had failed in his trust."

"But why," asked Frank, "is it her failure? It isn't her fault."

A look he had seen on Mrs. Carstairs' face before had come again—a kind of white pain, a look of moral faintness and of puzzle.

"It is the failure of any woman to fulfil her great task," she said. "Each home is a world if we could see it truly. I like to think of souls as immense spaces; but of course that is absurd, as their greatness is that space cannot hold them, just as time cannot wear them out."

She paused for breath. She sometimes ran on like this into queer metaphysical regions.

"I only mean that the whole thing is great, is immense. And, from some mysterious division of labour in their wonderful spiritual energies, the woman has to keep guard and to watch. The man has, I think, to go into other immense energies

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dealing with other forces; but she has the ordering of the relations between these souls, these spirit worlds. She is, I think, to blame somewhere if she fails, perhaps not actually at the moment, but in the past. There must have been some latent egotism, or deficiency in character, or pride, or a too strong sense of personal claims."

Frank thought there were tears in her low, sweet voice, but there was no consciousness of him.

"There may have been a want of restraint in her intense living in another; perhaps there was too much reserve with God and too little with man. I can imagine that Laura took her joys as too much her own possession, almost as if they came of her own right doing. And then, deep, deep down would pierce the knowledge of her failure, that she had failed him and failed the child. For, after all, there are women to whom men are always faithful."

There was a wail in the last words that cut Frank to the quick of his artistic sensibility. He longed to get its faint music into his work.

"To fail the child," she went on, "would be too awful; to keep a home together for the children is the object for which women have borne lives of slavery. It is in the very roots of their nature. And when Laura saw that she was betrayed, that the sacredness of their lives was lost, don't you think the existence of the child added to her pain tenfold?"

"Yes, yes," said Norbury. "All the secret instincts of nature would be touched. I think I understand."

"And," said Mrs. Carstairs, still singularly distracted, "she would feel that she must resist, must fight for the child's sake. Is it not one of the hardest parts of life's comedy that this agony is to the world a jest? Jealousy in man or woman is a by-

word, and, mind you, if it were the jealousy of a personal rivalry, of low spites and vanities, the world's verdict would be just. But when it is the great fight for life, for justice, for salvation, ought it not to have its dignity, its strength acknowledged? After all God chose to describe Himself as a jealous God; why must we always feel jealousy to be absurd? And a woman's pride bleeds at the absurdity. Would she not infinitely rather save herself from contamination and from ridicule? Why must she stay to be a laughing-stock? Every woman whose husband is in love with another woman is in a moral pillory, and any one may throw mud at her. Has she not at least the right of the deserted Hagar? May she not go into the desert with the child?"

The voice had grown harder and lower. There was something too passionate in its lowest notes. It was not quite what Frank, as an artist, wanted of his secretary; it was

not quite in tune. Then the eyes filled with tears and the face changed. She turned towards him with her usual gentleness, and, with an effort, she said in her ordinary tone:

“That was too feminine, Mr. Norbury. You won’t give Laura the benefit of all that, I hope. It is wrong somewhere; logical possibly, but not true. We must make sure that Laura’s story is quite true, morally true and sound and beautiful. And now would you let me go away for the rest of the day? It would be very kind to spare me, for I want to go and see my little daughter at her convent school. If I might go away now I could get a rest and be quite myself before I saw her.”

XI

LADY CROMLEIGH asked Frank Norbury to come and see her, and he found her, as she intended to be found, alone.

"I suppose," she remarked rather early in their talk, "that this is going to be the best book you have written yet? It ought to be, for it is taking a great deal out of you and out of Sophy too. You neither of you look well."

The Christian name is enough to show that intimacy between the ladies had so far only increased.

"Is not Sophy looking well?" he asked in surprise. "I think she must have one of her colds. I'll ask her. It certainly has nothing to do with my poor book."

Lady Cromleigh gave him a quick look.

"How could it?" she said. "But perhaps the secretary is tired by it?"

"Well, she is tired to-day, poor thing." He smiled at the futility of her fatigue in that endless copying. "But she has a day off; she has gone to see her child at school."

"Do you happen to know how old the child is?" said Betty sharply.

Frank looked surprised.

"No, I certainly don't. I didn't know of her existence till to-day. Though curiously enough this very morning I came to the conclusion that Mrs. Carstairs must have a child."

"Why?" asked Betty, now surprised herself. "How do mothers show it, pray?"

"I don't say all of them do," he answered laughing.

"Well, but how does this one show it?"

"Well, there is a kind of pathetic brooding, a sort of wistful anxiety, and yet a kind of satisfaction in her brown eyes."

Betty watched him. He almost blushed

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when he mentioned the brown eyes she thought. She had a certain roughness in her thoughts with regard to some topics. "Brown eyes," she repeated, as she fed her dog with dry biscuit. "By the way, are you still as full of sympathy with jealous wives as you were in an earlier stage of your story?"

"Even more so," he said. "I think it is my mission to assert the sacred character of jealousy."

"It really is a very odd world," said Betty Cromleigh to the dog, who was called Tomkins. "But, after all, there are no brown eyes nearly as beautiful as yours, Tomkins. What stage of the book have you come to now? Is the lady still on the rack or have they kissed and made it up?"

"Still on the rack," said Frank. "I must know a great deal more before she gets off it."

"I own," said Betty, "that what makes

me doubtful of your success is that the leading *motif* of your book is a little thin. A married man who loses his head or his heart to another woman, but who goes no lengths at all! Only his wife is hurt and kicks up a dust about it. Surely that sounds like the story of half the human race, and the human race has wisely agreed to treat the matter lightly."

"That's just the kernel of the tragedy," said Frank. "It's the utterly commonplace that is so awful in life. Think of all the women who have suffered."

"Fiddlededee!" said Lady Cromleigh, interrupting him. "The whole thing comes from a wild attempt to ignore facts. Man is a polygamist by nature and it's absurd to suppose that his imagination can be monogamist. His actions are all that ought to count, and a flirtation that remains in the region of the imagination ought simply to be ignored. You would lead every dowdy,

dull, domestic creature to think herself a martyr, and I am sure enough of them do that already. I can see that you think you are altering in your literary manner, that you are becoming stronger and more subtle at the same time; but Heavens! you are really going back to the goody-goody Early Victorians. To whom shall I liken you? Shall we say Miss Charlotte Yonge?"

She leant forward and laughed in his face. He laughed back again and changed her laugh from angry criticism to the tone of humour.

"What Early Victorian sprite is plaguing you, I wonder? And what will your admirers say to this new Norbury with his second manner?"

"I don't mind a jot," said Frank with the perfect naturalness which gave him his chief charm. "I care for this book as I have never cared about any of my books before. My whole heart is in it. It can't fail in the

long run. The people are living and breathing human beings. The heroine is out of the way, the best thing I have ever done, and the hero is getting alive. He was a stick; but after a long talk I had with Walter Middleton——”

“With Walter Middleton?” interrupted Lady Cromleigh.

“Yes, with Walter Middleton. I got to see the man’s point of view much better.”

“Ah!” said Lady Cromleigh; “but in what way?”

“Well, I understand how a man might be tempted pretty far off the lines without really being unfaithful in his heart. He would lock up his sacred places, as it were, and keep them safe all the time.”

“Would he really? That is most interesting.” Betty’s face had a curious little smile. “So, I see,” she commented. “The other woman remains morally in the street, while the wife is throned in an inner shrine.”

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She put her handkerchief to her mouth as if to hide a laugh. "The other woman's position is very low indeed. But do you know that I don't think that is any palliative to the evil conduct of your man. Just imagine for a moment what lies he must have told the other woman. Because after all you must not take for granted that the other woman was quite easily won even to a platonic love affair. Do you think it makes your man any less bad if he were a consummate liar?"

"Of course," said Frank, "he would have thought her beautiful and fascinating. Probably his life was flat at the time and she gave him stimulus and excitement. There are two kinds of romance, Lady Cromleigh, that of enduring affection and that which makes for colour."

"You mean," she said, "the sort of difference there is between sunset on the sea and the light of Chinese lanterns on the parade?"

"Yes," said Frank.

"Did Walter Middleton say that?"

"Something like it."

She moved uneasily in her chair.

"And did he give you any idea of how the man behaved, I mean should behave in your book, towards the other woman?"

"No. I think his only object was to show that I did not understand the man's point of view. He is amused at the idea of helping me to write my novel."

"I see. But I suppose you both took for granted that the other woman was the villain of the piece; a woman, you say, full of vitality, stimulating, and in whom you felt that the low light of a coarser nature made the colour. Did Walter Middleton tell you all that?"

"Yes," said Frank, who forgot which impressions of the other woman came from Middleton's notion of the book, and which from the secretary's conception of it.

"Well," said Lady Cromleigh, "it is good for an author to see all sides, so I will try to help you with the other woman. She is married, I think?"

"Yes, she is married."

"A woman, you say, full of life. But why is it low and coarse to be full of life? A woman who wants to be happy, to get all the joy she can. But she is hampered in a thousand ways; you can think them out for yourself—people and things, or want of things, cramp her. She sees no harm and means none. She likes the husband better than his wife, and lets him see it; she thought that some women did take the dull, tiresome part of life and become dull and tiresome themselves. Then, gradually, leaving, if you like, the lamps lit before his inmost shrine, the man takes his holidays out more and more. Was it her fault if he, a passionate man with violence latent in him, let her see that she was his ideal of woman? No,

don't interrupt; you may think him a consummate liar if you like, but my instinct tells me that your man made this woman believe that she had touched the depths of his feelings for the first time. Mind you, he must be very handsome, very masculine and yet not heavy." Lady Cromleigh laughed suddenly as she said that. "No, not at that date; he was full of ambitions that no one understood. Can't you, just for the sake of your book, see the other woman's point of view? He looked beautiful. He had a knack, perhaps only a knack, of appearing to worship, to pity, to protect with just that suggestion of a tyrant's capacities and a tyrant's force.

“ ‘A genoux, à nos pieds, il est déjà le maître,
Juge une fois debout, quel tyran ça doit
être!’

Given youth, given circumstances, how could she not enjoy his devotion? It was

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a draught of the wine of life to a thirsty soul."

As she spoke Lady Cromleigh rose and walked to the fireplace and turned her back on her visitor.

"According to your theory he kept his 'sacred places' locked up. All I can tell you is that I am convinced he was excessively bored by his home and his wife. Your martyr on the rack you described the other day must have been insufferable. Was a man of his kind, of his promise, to toddle about by her side and carry the baby or push the perambulator? She was the sort of woman who is bound to be put in the back seat; it really could not be helped. Somebody must take the back seat. This life is made up of the people who *will* go first, and the people who *must* come second. But it is so like a man to suppose that the other woman must be the villain of the piece. He reads his own low, bad feelings into her. He must

think evil of her afterwards because he behaved badly to her at the time. Because she was a temptation he chooses to think she was the temptress. And then——” She had sunk down on to a stool by the fire, and held one plump, firm hand towards the blaze. “The whole thing is really absurd. One is always getting the wrong values when one is talking of your book. As it was a mere flirtation, a little amusement, what harm could it do the wife, except to give her opportunities for endless sentimentality? And what a delicious moment for her when he explains that his heart and soul were hers all the time, while the temptress beguiled him. What a hero he would become in her eyes once more! By the bye, *is* that the end, Mr. Norbury?”

Frank had become distinctly uncomfortable. He felt conscious of suppressed wrath in Lady Cromleigh, and he of course disliked to be in the company of an angry woman.

Her face, as she talked, changed like a witch's face. At one moment he understood why Middleton had said that she looked like a hag, and at another a sense of humour made her lips curl and softened her angry grey eyes. — "Is that the end?" she repeated impatiently.

"I wish I knew," said Frank.

"Ah!" she said, "you are waiting to be told."

"Yes. I am in that at least like Thackeray and like Scott in writing this book. For the first time I follow my characters, I do not lead them."

"Do you like books which leave the end uncertain?" she asked, with her eyes fixed on the fire—"which just take one moment, one episode? I like to take life in episodes, and to leave them each unfinished. I hate stale, prolonged things, repetitions and post-scripts. Only sometimes I should like to know what happens to the other people

after the episode. But do you know I think, if I were you, I would let these people of yours only have an episode. Let the man and wife kiss and make up. And—" again she began to laugh, "let the other woman be the scapegoat. I can see her going off into the desert."

"I had thought that the neglected wife might be the person to go away. Supposing, like Hagar, she takes the child and goes into the desert?"

Lady Cromleigh turned right round on the stool and stared at him. Then she broke into a peal of laughter.

"Who put that into your head?" in the first interval between her laughs.

"I suppose you did, by speaking of the scapegoat," said the bewildered Norbury.

"Oh, it's uncanny, it's positively uncanny!" cried Lady Cromleigh. "Reconstruction by suggestion. I think it is the strangest thing, the most extraordinarily

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interesting thing. A picture-puzzle, put together, bit by bit, by such different players, who are always suggesting by each addition much more than they are aware of. Watching this is a new sensation, a positively new sensation. I do wish, oh, how I wish you would let me read it, Mr. Norbury. You can't imagine how I would enjoy it! I do really believe in it now."

"Then," said Frank, who was more bewildered than he wished to show, "you don't think after all that the *motif* is too slight for the book to be really interesting?"

"Oh, no. To me it is an immensely interesting study in human nature! Do, oh, do, let me read it. If I read it perhaps I could help you to see what is to be the end. Do you know, I do believe I could help you to see how they ought to finish up."

At that moment the door opened, and Lord Pentonville followed the servant into the room. Lord Pentonville was a tall man

of slight make, wiry and light of step, rather foreign in figure, spare but not athletic. Frank knew him a little, and was accustomed to the impression that Lord Pentonville wished everybody in his company to forget what a very important man he was.

"I want Mr. Norbury to let me read his new novel in MS. and he won't," Lady Cromleigh said presently. "Isn't it odious of him?" Betty's pouts were perfection.

"No artist," said Lord Pentonville, "likes the picture to be seen before it is finished."

"No portrait painter," corrected Lady Cromleigh.

"Do you mean to insinuate that Mr. Norbury's fiction deals in portraits?"

"I insinuate nothing," said Lady Cromleigh.

"That it certainly does not," said Norbury in a vexed voice. He spoke mechanically, and then felt what he said to be untrue. For was he not painting the por-

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trait of the job secretary, as he flattered himself, to the very life ?

"It's much harder to do a group than a single figure," said Lady Cromleigh irrelevantly.

"That is certainly the case in photography," said Lord Pentonville.

Frank took himself away and walked home.

"What the dickens did she mean by talking of a group, and why did she laugh so much ?"

Lord Pentonville, left alone with her, was watching Lady Cromleigh and presently said:

"What are you thinking about ?"

"I am thinking about an enemy."

"I saw your hand was clenched. I never saw so small a hand so horribly firm before. It makes me afraid."

"It is he, not you, I want to make afraid." She smiled on him deliciously. "I want to make him afraid, and then to make him suffer."

"Could I help you in any way? I am entirely at your service."

"I believe you could," said Betty giving a start. "You are such a very powerful person. But I won't trouble you just yet. I want to see the mice playing about before I jump."

"What a vindictive little lady it is!"

"Everybody is vindictive if their self-love is really mortified," said Lady Cromleigh, laughing.

"I can't imagine your suffering in that way," he said, leaning forward.

"What an old bore it is, after all!" thought Betty. And so she began to bully him, which was at once good policy and a relief to her nerves. If she drove with this man she would not only be on the front seat, but she intended to hold the reins.

XII

FRANK took a long walk that afternoon and chose Wimbledon Common for a place of meditation. That Common has a character of its own; something stern and severe, that no intrusion of neighbouring villas can soften. There are east winds, and the trees show that their life has not been a luxurious one. The beauty of the place is austere; it has not such a wealth as Hampstead Heath in great expanse and blue distance, but it has a charm which braces the imagination. Frank felt it a necessity to see something beautiful, to be alone, to be at leisure.

“It seems as if Laura meant to run away with the child. The other two are positively flaring their love, as they call it, in her face. They are telling her in so many words that it is they who possess the earth and its joys.

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She is beginning to feel that silence is a lie, and that inaction is acquiescence. He is rude to her before the servants; the other woman is rude to her in society. The child is a toy to them both, and is half-consciously made disobedient to her mother. Laura is intolerable to herself. She goes through every conceivable mood—moods of passionate humiliation, in which she will endure anything for love; moods of an intense wish to be alone, in which the intimacy of home life is torture. Well, then,” he paused a moment in his discourse to himself, “she comes to feel that something must be done, the air must be cleared by a storm. She feels at moments something like contempt for the two that they don’t act it out to the end and leave her free. Yet she knows perfectly well that this is exactly what she fears, as an agony too awful to be borne. The individual soul cries out to be free, while she knows that

in the strength of her bonds is the only hope of the future. One evening when passing through the drawing-room in the dusk, she saw that they were sitting hand in hand, and seeing her they did not move, only she fancied there was a tiny smile on the other woman's face. That night she remembered while lying awake that most poignant tragedy of the life of Catharine of Braganza: how the queen bore with the king's mistress, and that it was his most bitter reproach against her, and the most urgent of his excuses for his after life, that the queen had not minded. I think that Laura then determined to go away. She would choose a day when he was certain to be out for many hours, then she would tell the nurse to go out for the afternoon. She would go away by an afternoon train, to somewhere—but where? I do wish I knew where she went, but that matters infinitely less than to know what she wrote to him.

Would she write a passionate explanation? I think not. Or a reproach? No, I'm sure not. I think——" Frank drew a notebook from his pocket—"I think——" He scribbled down:

"You must not be surprised at my going away so suddenly. I am in need of a change. I shall be here for a few days, and will let you know when I move. Your loving——"

"No, no. She could not put that there. 'Yours ever'——such a commonplace but such a truth, such an enduring truth in her broken heart—

"'Yours ever, Laura.'

"I think she went somewhere on the coast with an idea of going abroad. She would make herself very busy with the child, making her laugh at the sudden holiday. And the child would laugh, and laugh, and cry: 'Oh, won't Daddy be surprised when he finds that we are gone! Oh, Mummy, won't he go through all the rooms looking

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for us and then he'll go to Dandelion's house (Dandelion was the child's name for the other woman), and he'll tell Dandelion how we've come away for a joke, and they'll laugh—oh, won't they laugh! And then I suppose Daddy will come to-morrow, and do you think he will bring Dandelion too? Oh, how I should like that, and I could have fun with them by the sea.' Again, after night prayers, she said, 'Do you think Daddy will come to-morrow, Mother? Daddy is sure to come.' And then, when the child was asleep, Laura went out,—the house was intolerable; and standing under the window of her room, she looked out to sea. This was what she had wanted. Nobody could see her face now and notice if it were pale, and wonder if she were really meek; silence always seems to have annoyed those who torture. She leant out over a low wall, and the water made those noises that seem so secret in each

wave, the move forward towards the earth and the return movement, before any revelation has been made towards reserve and gradual silence. Ah, she was alone, thank God, she was alone. The sea and the sky spoke to her as a great voice of freedom, and she was soothed, caressed by the soft wind and the sound of little waves and a grey, infinite stretch of sky. How she had ached to be alone! But when she lay by the sleeping child that night, as straight and as still as if she had been in her coffin—during those sleepless hours, she sobbed bitterly, sobbed those silent sobs that shake the whole being, body and soul, in an awful spasm of pain—as she acknowledged to herself that she had come away because Daddy was sure to follow.”

It was getting dark. Frank knew thus much more of his story than he had done

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on coming up. He turned his steps vigorously towards Wimbledon; he could go home by the most prosaic of ways now. It was a long electric train and he got in cheerfully, but almost from the moment of his starting a certain depression came over him. Something in the profile of a lady at the far end of the carriage made him think of Sophy, and somehow the likeness annoyed him. Then some words of Sir Walter Middleton's came back to him, implying that his marriage with Sophy was a singularly happy one. It was probably only a form of civility, but it teased him. He had been indulging lately in a sort of artistic enthusiasm for marriage, for fidelity, for the home. He had had fancies of his hero and heroine praying together, having a love that lightened everything, that made even the dull things of life worth while. It should all be simple and noble. This enthusiasm was in reality a symptom of how far modernity

had possessed him, of how the decorative side of life and the knowledge of the world he had chosen to live with had affected him. It was because he had travelled so far from the traditions of the past that enthusiasm for marriage came to him as so new an idea, that it held a fresh poetic charm. And now he was for the moment gradually, half consciously, applying this new ideal to himself and Sophy with some sense of irritation. Sophy was a pleasant, material-minded little person, who just did what everybody else did, rather better than some of them and not quite so well as others. She dressed well, and talked with an intelligent little chirp, and was seldom ruffled. She had a vague benevolence and joined many committees, and was not quite sure of the objects of some of them. She had a dainty taste in life, knew how to enjoy what was beautiful in art and in music and in religion, touching it all lightly like

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a sparrow. She was a pleasant companion for the life they both led. Her gift of tact was so excellent that he hardly realised its existence. But there came back to him now the slight disappointment he had known when she told him two years after their marriage that she was not likely to have a child, but that she would not worry and spoil life, as some women did in hopes of getting one. After all, a child gave a great deal of bother. When Frank and Sophy married they did it because, after being thrown together for months, they felt it would be tiresome to part. It seemed to him now that he had missed much that was ideal and delightful and ennobling in married life. He was tired, and the strain of the noise and bustle seemed intolerable, and so he went home a little irritable and found that Sophy was waiting to speak to him before dressing for dinner.

“Betty Cromleigh wants us to go down

for the end of next week to Shawhurst. Sir Walter Middleton and one or two other people will be there. We can go, can't we?"

"You can," said Frank, "but I don't think I can leave my work."

Sophy was surprised. Frank always said that a couple of mornings in the country were delightful for work, and the garden at Shawhurst was ideal.

"I work best in my own study, I am sure," he went on; "and I should lose Monday morning at home."

"Oh, yes," said Sophy. "You would lose the help of your secretary."

"You need not be sarcastic," said Frank, laughing. "She really does help me."

"I've no doubt of it," said Sophy gaily. "By the way, Betty asked me yesterday to let her know when Mrs. Carstairs would be free, as she wants a secretary herself presently."

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"Oh, not for some time yet. I've written to Miss Archiefield that she must stay with her mother as long as she is really needed."

He left the room as he spoke, and Sophy looked after him.

"It's a perfect infatuation," she said to herself. "He is not the same person since she came. But it really doesn't matter. I wonder what he would think if I took to that ideal passion of jealousy! But it would be too bad for the complexion." Sophy gave a sad little sigh at her poor joke. "However, Frank must come to Shawhurst or Betty will tease me. I wish she would sometimes talk of somebody else but Mrs. Carstairs. It's more natural that Frank's secretary should be an obsession to Frank than an obsession to Betty."

Looking over his notes that night, Frank felt them to be flat. He had not suc-

ceeded in seeing what that flight must have been to Laura. He was not at all sure that these characters of his were going to act of themselves as well as he had hoped.

He slept uneasily, and dreamed that he saw Mrs. Carstairs on the edge of a high cliff, looking out to sea and making some appeal to him that gave him a vague distress. He woke, and tried to conquer the discomfort that was still on him by thinking of his own mental picture of Laura alone at night looking out at the vastness of the sea and sky. He thought the wind was fluttering her garments, and he wondered which way the wind was blowing; then, passively following the chain of ideas in his memory he began to repeat the lines he loved best in all Browning's poetry. Was not the voice of James Lee's wife the voice of Laura? Could any other words "falter forth a sorrow" as those did?

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i

“Still ailing, Wind? Wilt be appeased or no?
Which needs the other’s office, thou or I?
Dost want to be disburthened of a woe,
And can, in truth, my voice untie
Its links, and let it go?”

ii

“Art thou a dumb, wronged thing that would be
righted,
Entrusting thus thy cause to me? Forbear!
No tongue can inend such pleadings; faith, re-
quited
With falsehood,—love, at last aware
Of scorn,—hopes, early blighted,—

iii

“We have them; but I know not any tone
So fit as thine to falter forth a sorrow;
Dost think men would go mad without a moan,
If they knew any way to borrow
A pathos like thy own?”

XIII

SOPHY went to Shawhurst alone, not in the brightest state of mind, and she was disappointed not to find Sir Walter Middleton of the party.

“He has been abroad and is not back yet. Something or other has kept him.” Lady Cromleigh’s voice was irritable.

But it was not true that Sir Walter was still abroad. In fact, he was in London that night, dining at the ‘Travellers’ with a young man, a former secretary, whom he particularly liked. He seemed in good spirits and pitched into the champagne, as his young friend noticed, in a way very unusual with him. Late in the evening they parted, and Middleton made his way to Frank Norbury’s house. The appearance of good spirits had certainly left him

as he settled heavily into Frank's one large chair and lit a cigar.

"Somebody told me at the Travellers' that you were not at Shawhurst with your wife, so I came to see if by good luck you were at home."

"You have been abroad?"

"Yes, I've been in Belgium. I went there—" he hesitated—"yes, I went there, but I came back quickly enough. Norbury, when I was in this room one night and talked to you about your novel, had you no suspicion that I was thinking of something else besides your book?"

"No, no," said Frank.

"Well then, I feel to-night that I must speak to somebody; it has become a physical necessity. If I did not speak to the kindest fellow in the world I should speak to some blabbing fool." He paused. Frank sank back on the low seat on which he was perched with one leg curled under him.

He had experienced a real shock. Sympathetic, and a most willing listener by nature and habit, he could have shrieked to Middleton not to go on. Into his world of imagination, into his beloved work of art, he realised at once that there had come a terrible touch of reality. He had been striving for the real and true, and now it came, and he shrank as if he had had a blow. What moral consequences, what duties of friendship might come between him and his success—his first prospect of really great work? But Middleton noticed nothing. Leaning forward, he spoke in his strong, subdued voice, not kept low by intentional gentleness, but by a depth of resentment.

“Well, I was the man whose point of view I tried to explain to you; the woman who would not forgive was my wife, and the other woman was—well, was the other woman. What have I done that I should be avoided like the pest, hidden from as if

I should do something violent? Was it not enough to rush away with her child and make a scandal at the moment, and then show no sign of relenting? Writing letters about her movements, her address, the child's health—even the clothes to be sent after her—and not a word about coming back! I was left to do my best to make things appear respectable and to save the reputation of an innocent woman, however mischievous a one. Good God, what a power of hatred, of resentment! She was so gentle, so quiet until the storm burst, and even then she never explained, never said why she had gone. When I got my appointment in North India, she only wrote that she would come with me if I wished, in a letter that plainly showed it would be torture to her to have to live with me. I knew it was all over then. Gradually the talk died down. At first I said, and it was repeated, that she would not come with me on account

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of the child's health; then I think people almost forgot her existence. I am not a man whose personal affairs rouse much interest. Once when I was ill indeed she changed. She telegraphed twice for news, and wrote several times, *banal* little letters. Clever as she was she never could write a letter. I know I was bitter and angry, and I suppose I showed it in my answers. It seemed so absurd that she should write polite notes about my health. All the time, though I can't explain it, the thought of her as she once had been, of our seven years together, kept me out of mischief. It was extraordinary how quickly the other woman faded. Partly because she was so brutal—brutal is the only word—when the crisis came. She accused my wife of wishing to destroy her reputation out of spite. I shall never forget the scene when I told her that my wife had gone. She was like a wild cat in the glare of her eyes; and though I sympa-

thised with her at the moment, I saw afterwards what absolute cruelty, wide-awake cruelty, she had shown my wife for weeks before the crisis. Norbury, there is leisure for thought in India, and for realisation. But do you know that not in the longest wakeful night or sleepless hour of *siesta* did I ever feel how she must have suffered, as I did when you talked of your novel? You must have a strange power of understanding women. Well, for six years I was in India, and I came home constantly vacillating between different plans. One thing was clear, that I must have something, however little, of a father's rights. I must see my girl—she is twelve now. She has written to me little duty letters for my birthdays and for Christmas and for Easter. I did not think I should have any difficulty in seeing her. The vehement indifference and dislike to me did not make my wife do anything spiteful against me

with regard to the child. Indeed till this week I should have thought her incapable of petty spite, or of any sort of cruelty except what was negative and passive. It is altogether inconceivable to me that the woman I lived with for seven years, knowing her every thought and feeling, should be the same person as she seems to be now. But I will tell you what happened this week. From the day I got to London I hesitated between telling my lawyer that there must be arrangements made for my having the child, Lucy, to stay with me for a time, or going myself to Belgium and asking to see her when and where her mother liked. I went to Bruges, and I know now that I was deceiving myself grossly. It was not only for the child I went. I wanted to see her mother's face again, however she might receive me. I was hungry for a sight of her. Well, I went; and as soon as I got to the hotel I sent a messenger with a letter I had

finally written after several futile attempts before I left England." Walter paused. He was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. He buried his face in his hands for a moment, and then, raising his head, met Frank's eyes with his own, which were stern and terrible. "The man came back into the hotel quickly enough, and came into my room; I did not turn my eyes from the *Place*, into which I was looking. I held out my hand for an answer to my letter. Norbury, she had gone, and left no address!"

Both men were silent. Frank felt an intolerable sense of sympathy, but also an intolerable discomfort for himself.

"That was damned hard," he said at length, in his kindly, sympathetic voice, and no other words could have hurt so little. After a few minutes Walter Middleton went on in a different tone.

"What a place it is! No wonder it has

been called *Bruges la Morte*. It is inconceivable that a young and very beautiful woman should have been buried there for six years. As I walked in the narrow, lifeless streets I kept muttering to myself, like the man in the 'Tale of Two Cities,' 'Buried alive six years, for six years buried alive.' What amazing power of will a woman can have! Rather than forgive me for those weeks of folly, she lived in that awful, dead place, buried alive. She has been growing older. I wonder if her hair has changed. How soft it was! Do you know, the strangest thing happened. I went to one of the churches. I thought I would try to find out if anything in that place could have attracted her. I had, too, an idea that I might find some priest who knew her. But when I saw an old man coming down the church I determined to leave the question unasked; I would not condescend to hunt her out. I must have time to think what to do about

the child. Well, I knelt down and said something like a prayer, and when I got up I saw in a chapel close to me a picture of Mater Dolorosa—of a young Mater Dolorosa—and it might have been a picture of my wife. It was an exquisite picture, and it seemed at the moment to soften my anger. The face calmed and answered my prayer at the moment by making me feel a strange hope and trust. I got a photograph of it. I think it is in my pocket-book.” He pulled out an old leather pocket-book and searched its contents, while Frank watched him with absolute fear betrayed in his eyes. “No, it is not. Well, you shall see it another time.” He rose as he spoke. “Now you know something of my position, Norbury.”

“It’s inconceivable,” was Frank’s comment.

“It’s a fact,” said Sir Walter, grimly. “I am hidden from as if I were an ogre. And

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this last blow came without warning, for there had been no threat of hiding the child. I am here in an entirely false position. In a more respectable state of society it would go against me very much; as it is, it sickens me to see that some people like me better because they think I have a past. God knows I have had but one slip, and that—well, I must not make too little of that; for after all, as you said the other day, probably only circumstances prevented my sin from being a still worse one than it was. Good-night, Norbury. You are the best of consolers because you are the most silent listener. Thank you.”

Frank felt these last words to be a hint that that silence should not again be broken. He followed Middleton mutely to the door, and stood on the doorstep watching the drizzling rain that hardly seemed to account for the amount of wet he presently felt on his face and clothes.

"You don't see it till you're wet through," said a labourer who was passing, in a depressed voice to his companion.

Frank went back into the little study and sank into the chair by the typewriter, and mechanically put his hand on the pile of MS. He knew now why the man in his book had come alive after his first talk with Walter Middleton. He had been drawing from his friend's own experience of suffering, and *that* was individual and personal enough. But till now he had been unconscious of what he was doing. He sat down, and he blushed as he took his pen. He felt a traitor, but he felt as if he could do nothing else; he had no choice, it seemed. "It is Kismet," he said. And he wrote on till three in the morning; he was telling the story from the man's point of view. "It was not my fault that he would come and tell me," said Frank.

But when he had written it and had

adapted it to his heroine, giving his other model's face for the picture of Mater Dolorosa—and how wonderfully well it fitted into its place—he put the paper on which he had written into a drawer quite apart from those which were kept in order by his secretary. And I suppose it was shame that made him turn the key in the lock and then put it in his pocket.

“It is an amazingly fortunate thing that the facts fit exactly into the story. *Bruges la Morte* is perfection for the desert I was looking for; it makes it infinitely more living. Only my heroine could never be as cruel as Lady Middleton.”

Let it be remembered that Frank was absolutely absorbed in a work that had become a passion with him. Publication seemed but a dim, distant vista. He must go on now, he could disguise it afterwards; no one should ever know, ever understand. He knew that that night he had written far,

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far better than he had ever written before. He felt at once the delicious joy of having given expression to life and truth, but he ached, too, with the strain.

XIV

"I HAVE always thought," said Frank to his secretary, "that a man must wait years before he could describe in a novel what he has seen or experienced. It seemed to me one of the distinctions between the higher imaginative literature and journalism. Who said that literature is life seen through a temperament? A great novelist gives the thing back after it has gone through a process of assimilation with his other thoughts, a process of complete digestion. A journalist boils his lobster alive, as it were, and serves it up at once, each impression detached. He is writing for the public mind emphatically, and not in order to reveal his own inner thoughts."

"I have always thought that the process

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of assimilation in any artist must be very slow," said Mrs. Carstairs. "And this need for the slow work of the years alone would account for the inferiority of the books describing what has been seen for the first time in middle life, to those giving what was seen as a child. Take George Eliot's characters in her first books. Dinah Morris and Mrs. Poyser, for instance, were both drawn from her earliest experience of life; she had had time to assimilate them completely. It was a combination of the most vivid perceptions—those of a child—and the completest assimilation."

Frank sighed. "There are exceptions to every rule, happily," he said. "I suppose there may be, occasionally, some excitement or sympathy that causes a very rapid assimilation."

His conscience was perfectly at ease this morning. He was extremely anxious to get at Mrs. Carstairs' opinion of what he had

written, without letting her know too much about it.

A young Mater Dolorosa; how well that described her also! That curious, delicate, translucent complexion that the Flemish artists excelled in. The eyes were strangely clear, and with the extraordinary look of experience and yet of freshness that he had seen in some pictures of saints. They knew so much, those women in the old Flemish pictures; knew so much of God, of themselves, of their fellow-men. They were so clear as to the past, the present and the future, that they seemed dateless. Yet their knowledge was not crude, not like children in school repeating the Catechism by rote. There was just that look of being slightly puzzled, a little lost because life and faith did not always agree. They understood really, but they acknowledged much that was difficult; they felt the hard enigmas of life, but to them innumerable "difficulties could not

make one doubt." He felt a shrinking as he looked at Mrs. Carstairs, a shrinking reverence that I think was the sensation of the artist. He felt a delicious hesitation in probing her nature that was simply part of the pleasure of the process. But the process was becoming more and more hazardous.

"Do you know, as I go on," said Norbury, "I feel more and more that the man in my book had never ceased to love his wife. I am not sure if it is possible to make a woman understand that."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Carstairs.

"You see," said Frank, "the man in our book was no blackguard and neither was he simply superficial."

"Certainly not," said the secretary.

"Well, then, when he got a craze for this other woman, he did not see that it interfered with his love of his wife. That was something sacred and apart."

"But no man can love two women at once," said the secretary. "It is a horrible idea!"

"Strangely enough it's true," said Frank. "One is the highest love and the other is the romance of a lower world. A man can hardly help feeling the romance of beauty, life and colour."

"That theory would excuse anything," said Mrs. Carstairs, bending over her work and reddening.

"It does not really excuse, it only explains," said Frank.

"I should *understand* a man better who was tempted and fascinated, and fell and repented afterwards. He would repent in God's sight and be forgiven; but he could not keep his love safely locked up in a box and open it and find it again. The first love must have been killed by the second." She hesitated a little in her speech and turned towards him the white face with

the pained sense of mystery in it. "Once killed it could not live again," she repeated.

"You don't really think that love is never revived?"

"Not the same thing," she said. "There may be duty and affection, but not love." Her voice was distressed and irritable. "You know," she added, with a swift, gentle smile, "I can't get on with my copying if we talk so much."

Frank was silent. He was absurdly distressed at what she had said. He was so anxious to be true and nothing but true. He had taken Walter Middleton's analysis as truth itself, and now Mrs. Carstairs, in whose instincts and judgment he felt a much more complete confidence, was vehemently in opposition. Besides, he wanted a happy end to the book; and if the heroine took this view of the hero how could he bring them together? But he wisely said

nothing more just then. Mrs. Carstairs always had her luncheon at a tea shop in Mount Street, and he had seen her one day coming out of a church he did not know, just before coming back to his house. Whence he had deduced the fact that it was her custom to put in some time of prayer during the hour of luncheon. He had lately formed a habit of coming in for the last hour of her stay. The valet had discovered that what Mrs. Carstairs really liked was *café au lait* instead of tea at four o'clock. Frank now often joined her while she had it, on the ground that he, too, infinitely preferred coffee to five o'clock tea and that it was a good moment in which to arrange the work for next day. Sophy, about the same time, gave a general order that tea would not be wanted in the drawing-room, as she was always out for it. Adèle, the maid, who was evidently among the admirers of Mrs. Carstairs, often added

*brioche*s, from a French shop which she patronised, to the little meal.

Frank found Mrs. Carstairs looking much more peaceful this afternoon than in the morning. She smiled brightly as he came in; she had found a quotation he needed. A certain facility for finding her way amongst the books she had read was almost her only technical qualification for a secretary.

"I was right about Cleopatra," she said. "Cleopatra hopped on one foot forty paces down a public road,—Shakespeare says so."

"I knew she had all the ways of the women of the world of the type called smart here in England, whatever they were called in Egypt. Could we not mention one or two women in London now who have probably hopped forty paces in a public road, if they have not actually played leap-frog in public? How difficult it is to analyse the bizarre element in such women! But,

do you know, I want to speak again of my book, if it won't bore you too much. I really don't understand your view of this morning."

She coloured a little, but did not look angry now.

"I don't—forgive my saying so—quite understand it in a Christian."

Mrs. Carstairs said nothing.

"It seems to me that the whole Christian theory consists in believing that the past is never irremediable. A man loves God, then he loves sin better, then he loves God again perhaps far more than he did before. You surely think that that love is not merely a sense of duty. Now I don't know if I am in danger of the heresy of Molinos or of anybody else, but I am inclined to think that in a certain sense such a man loves God all the time. Mind you, I am not a believer. I live in the 'perhaps.' But, from your point of view, that is what

seems to me the natural explanation. The love has been subconscious, the neglect and the revolt have been conscious. Repentance is a returning to the real self. When Peter, having denied Christ, had to tell Him that he loved Him, all he could say was, 'You know that I do.' It seems to me to mean, 'You have understood me all the time, even at the worst.'"

"I can't quite go with you," said Mary Carstairs. "I think one does kill the love of God in oneself, but one has to thank Him that it comes to life again."

"Well, take it as you like, though I like my theory best. All I want you to believe is that the love, whether it has slept and can awake again, or was dead and must be raised from the dead,—I want you to believe that that love can live again."

Frank looked at her with terrible eagerness; he was pleading for the man in the book, pleading still more for the happiness

of the woman in the book. For how could there be any hope of dawn after the night of sorrow if the woman did not believe that she could be loved again?

Mrs. Carstairs looked at him with a wonderful light shining in her face. She was sitting with her hands folded, those intensely white hands lying in her lap, and she was very still. She said in a low voice, that had a vibrating note:

“Do you know, I prayed to understand that idea better to-day, and it seems to me I was wrong, not in thinking that the love was dead, but in denying the possibility of its resurrection. It was my little faith.”

Frank gave a deep sigh of relief. There was just that much gained. He felt rather tired, there had been an intensity in his anxiety that he could not feel to be absurd. After seeing Walter Middleton's bowed form in that very chair, and the dull

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suffering in his eyes, those eyes of the man from the East that have been strained for so many years towards the West; having seen him in the very chair in which the secretary was seated now, Norbury could feel nothing but the most intense reality in his anxiety that a woman's mind should understand, to some degree, what had passed in the man's.

It had been a real shock to him, in the morning, to find how widely different was her point of view, how it seemed to rasp and hurt her to have the other put before her. How could he ever fathom, how could he interpret this strange antagonism between a man's and a woman's point of view? It was all very well to strive to avoid mere notions, and to keep to the search for individuality; but what problems any individual, if alive, forced upon your mind! He was more and more inclined to think that the process was a right one;

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study the individual and you find the sex. Begin by studying the idea of sex and you miss the man or the woman. Well, in studying this man and woman, he had come upon a new antagonism that led into deep questions like a deep fissure in the rock. But, after all, he was an artist first and last—others must analyse what he must describe.

XV

LADY CROMLEIGH, badly in need of sensations of some sort, was looking phenomenally bored at an evening party, her hair ruffled, her eyes large, light and angry, when she saw Frank Norbury in the distance. She looked at him across the intervening crowd until he joined her, and then she said abruptly:

“Find some place where I can sit down or my legs will give under me. I can’t sit on the floor in the midst of this multitude, the atmosphere would be too unpleasant.”

A quiet corner with an empty sofa being found, she arranged herself as comfortably as possible, in an attitude expressive of contempt, but not of indifference. She had too much curiosity to be indifferent.

Indeed she kept an eye on the herd of the social world all the time she talked with Frank.

"I know why you did not come to Shaw-hurst," she said, "you were almost brutal in your truthfulness, but at least you honestly refused when you were asked. But why did Walter Middleton throw me over? When did he get to London, and where had he been to?"

Frank tackled the easiest question.

"He came to see me, to my surprise, very late on Saturday night, but I forgot to ask him when he had arrived."

"Did he tell you where he had been to?"

"Yes," Frank decided not to hesitate, "he had been in Belgium."

Lady Cromleigh drew her scarf round her with an abrupt gesture.

"Then he had been to Bruges," she said, "and I suppose he told you why?"

Frank did not answer.

"Exactly so," said Betty, and then she laughed. "But did he tell you why he did not come to Shawhurst?"

"No, he didn't allude to Shawhurst."

"I see, *some* questions can be answered, Mr. Norbury. Did he seem cheerful and in good spirits?"

Frank was annoyed at having no answer ready, but silence seemed the only honourable thing.

"Exactly so," said Lady Cromleigh; and she turned to stare more at her ease at a handsome woman who had just passed by. "What on earth has made Alice Tenterden dress in green? It must be judicial blindness, because she ought to be at home nursing old Tenterden." And then, without a pause, "It was silly of Sir Walter to go to Bruges like that. If his wife had been there it gave her a chance of administering a vigorous snub, and was it likely that she should always be sitting on one chair? He ought

to have got her address from the lawyers. Of course they know where she is, there must be some allowance paid for the child. His wife had not too much money for herself; barely enough for bread and butter."

Frank stared at anything so concrete as Lady Cromleigh's dealing with the facts of his friend's heart-breaking story.

"He ought to have written first and asked to see the child. The child would be such an easy way of getting at her mother. Then they could view each other from a distance, and see if they liked each other after a six years' pause. He has changed immensely; as a rule the woman changes most, but perhaps sitting still in Bruges preserves the complexion."

Lady Cromleigh curled herself a little further upon the sofa.

"What is Lady Middleton like?" There was a catch in Frank's voice as he spoke.

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"Why, by the way; yes, she is Lady Middleton; that is rather amusing."

"What was she like when you knew her?"

Betty looked at him hard.

"I never can describe people," she said. "And even if I could I would not tell you. I don't think I like you. You won't show me your book for one thing, and for another I think you are a mass, an absolute mass of self-deception. You only see what you choose to see and what suits your own purpose."

Frank laughed.

"I wish I knew what I am shutting my eyes to."

"No, you don't," said Betty. "You hug your blindness. I think Sophy is an angel to put up with you. But meanwhile tell me what has happened in the book. Has the wife gone into the desert with the child?"

"Yes, she has."

"What sort of place is the desert?"

Frank was silent.

"Exactly so," said Lady Cromleigh, and she began to laugh uncontrollably. "Oh, I must behave myself. But now it has only just struck me. I wish you would tell me what your heroine is like. There, it's a bargain, if you will tell me what your heroine is like, I will do my best to describe Lady Middleton."

Frank's discomfort was almost torture, he looked about him and saw relief in the distance.

"There is Lord Pentonville," he said in a tone of interjectural comment, "talking to the beautiful Miss Peet."

Lady Cromleigh rose at once without the faintest pretence.

"Take me there," she said, "I have something to say to him."

They made their way through the crowd,

Betty ignoring nervous attempts at greetings from some people and making passing remarks to others. When they reached the spot where Lord Pentonville was talking to Miss Peet she passed them by and then gave him an impertinent little *moue* over her shoulder. He joined her before they reached the door. Betty kept Lord Pentonville waiting a moment as she said quite audibly:

"Has anybody told you what the other woman was like?"

"Yes," said Frank, in angry impatience, as Lady Cromleigh's mouth began to quiver with the coming laugh.

"He won't let me read that book, Lord Pentonville, although there is not a single portrait in it." Making it impossible for Frank to escape without appearing to be in a temper, she went on very gravely: "I have been advising him to draw a little more from life, his work is so beautiful,

but almost too decorative. I wonder if he would forgive me for saying that it is just a little wanting in individuality."

"Mr. Norbury's books have such a charm for me, that I feel no inclination to criticism," said Lord Pentonville, trying as he spoke to remember if he had ever read any of the works in question.

"Thank you," said Frank with his most winning smile, and he was really grateful to him, for the little sentence checked Lady Cromleigh and he was free to get away.

XVI

"To Bruges," said Mrs. Carstairs, "but why in Heaven's name to Bruges? Bruges is not a desert."

Frank was deeply occupied with his notes, and did not see the expression on his secretary's face. She looked positively scared.

"It's a moral desert," said Frank.

"No, indeed it is not," said Mrs. Carstairs with an effort at her usual voice.

"It's the most awful, inconceivable spot for any one to live in," said Frank.

"Have you ever been there?" she asked.

"I must own that I have only spent the day there," said Frank, smiling.

"Then don't attempt to describe it," said the secretary sternly.

"By Jove! you are right," he said. "I ought to have thought of that!"

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"Don't attempt it," she said again. "How can you imagine what it is to the people who love it? The grim, dead town, bare in parts, stern at its best. You may be there some time before a glimpse of its inner life reaches you. So few gardens inside the ramparts, and flat, dull country outside. One looks impatiently for the picturesque corners, for the bridges and the canals, for the things that make illustrations to artistic guide books. And when you go to church the people are praying or singing in hideous guttural Flemish, or somebody is preaching in the same horrible tongue. And the principal churches have solid black marble blocks, like sarcophagi, for rood screens. And then, by degrees, there dawns on you the fact that nothing can spoil the churches, that no language can disguise the living faith of the people. And the pictures teach me far more than any other school of painting. Their glory

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of colour is never enervating, their view of life is so strong, on such large lines. Justice, truth, mercy, but, above all, justice. In Bruges you know that evil must bring awful consequences, that there is nothing beautiful that is not pure. I can't tell how that is, but I have come out of St. John's Hospital intoxicated with the colour of those pictures, and I have felt all the same that they really belong to the little narrow, dead streets. Somehow they express the soul of the town that has known so much suffering. In Bruges, justice is beautiful and winning, beauty is austere and almost terrible. It breathes the sense of the presence of the God of Justice. I suppose there is no spot on earth so fitted for penance as Bruges—for the penance that at last forces the bones that have been humbled to rejoice."

She had talked on as if she were alone, then suddenly she said:

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"Could you, just as a personal kindness to me, leave Bruges out of your book?" There had been very, very little of the secretarial manner in Mrs. Carstairs at any time. But nothing in greater contrast to professional relations between them could be imagined than her attitude as she asked this favour. Something startled Frank into a sudden consciousness of what she had been throughout the days he had known her. He tried to speak naturally.

"You must know Bruges well," he said; and then he knew perfectly what she would say. He had brought the blow upon himself.

"I lived there for six years," said Mrs. Carstairs. "But you won't bring Bruges into your book," she pleaded again.

"No, I won't," he said. What did such a detail matter now? He almost fancied he could hear Lady Cromleigh's laugh, mocking at his trouble.

XVII

It was a cold, beautiful spring evening. Frank had refused to dine out, he was free. He took a hansom and drove to Wimbledon Common. For a few moments after the hansom moved he sat back, mechanically watching the passers by in Piccadilly and in Brompton Road. Then he faced his trouble. He could not be mistaken, and yet how incredible, how absurd it seemed. It was at first chiefly a sense of personal pain. There was nothing in his friendship with Mrs. Carstairs that Lady Cromleigh ought to jeer at, there was nothing foolish or absurd. But it was a real and deep friendship, and it hurt him very keenly to feel that it must come to an end. It was impossible, absolutely impossible for him to employ Walter Middleton's

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wife as his secretary—preposterous—he laughed as the thought came into words. And what an intolerable position, what a desperately hard thing that this book of his, which he believed to be the first really great thing he had ever done, should have grown out of his intercourse with these two people—should have been born out of their sorrow. He writhed as he saw the position in its horrible clearness. He was the victim of his own power of winning the confidence of others. With what other man would Mrs. Carstairs have been so free, so natural, to whom else have unconsciously told so much of her story—to what other friend would Walter have consciously confided his terrible distress?

More than ever Frank's sympathies went out to the woman. How delightful she had been, what an exquisite mind; it was full of delicious activities and suggestions. How could any man have turned from her to an-

other woman? How could her husband have ever done anything but praise God for her existence? If she were beautiful now, had she not been more beautiful six years ago?

Each fact that made the Middletons' story clear to him was positive pain. These two living people were shattering his work. If it had been a statue he had hewn out of stone, and they had attacked it with chisels and hammers, they could not have done more mischief. It was a cruel, cruel fate. And then, as man to man, the position was dreadful. That, for one instance, he should be paying Middleton's wife in little cheques for her work! He was distracted from his own plight for the moment by this mysterious point of Lady Middleton's working for money. Then he remembered that Lady Cromleigh had said she had not too much of her own. He could imagine that she might refuse all help from her husband, and life in

London would be much more expensive than in Bruges. Then again—dreadful thought!—Middleton had heard all his jokes about the incapacity of the new secretary. The secretary whose views—Great Heavens!—whose ideas he had echoed about what was in fact Middleton's own story—ideas that had made Walter first burst into the defence of the man's point of view. Frank racked his memory to recall what horrible, what awful things he must himself have said. How could they ever meet again? He really, positively, must not see Middleton again for ages and ages.

I fear he was in no altruistic mood, that he was thinking of them both chiefly as they affected himself. He told himself that though he was not really in love with Mrs. Carstairs, he was terribly in love with the picture he had drawn of her. He had caught, he thought, the true note in her personality, he had made her so alive in

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his book, even her absurd unpractical ways, her amusing incapacity for the most ordinary things and her capacity of soul and subtlety of mind. O, surely she was a heroine to glory in, by whom men might be charmed and women touched!

He had caught, he believed, her spiritual atmosphere, her mystical outlook, her humility and her pride. It was not crude portraiture such as that of a photographer. The temperament through which he had seen Mary Carstairs had needed years of training, of self-development, of cultivation. Asked how long it had taken him to do a drawing, Whistler answered, "All my life," and Frank could have said the same. It was not merely the last few weeks he had spent on his book, it was all his life. All his past life had not held, and all the rest of his life might not give him, such a chance again. How could such a sacrifice be asked of him? And then, gradually, he began to

dread Lady Cromleigh. For how was it possible for him to do what was preparing in the background of his mind, if Lady Cromleigh had already found him out? He knew now that it was her accusation that he was shutting his eyes wilfully that had brought about the catastrophe. He had put out that feeler about Bruges from some dim region of his mind, from which had come, too, the dread of receiving Middleton's confidence. He had felt guilty when Lady Cromleigh accused him of wilful blindness,—had he looked guilty? What would she think if he let things go on now? If he left Walter and his wife to find each other out, if he just stayed quiet and waited to see the end?

If so, this discovery made no difference to him, except that he would watch them both, listen to them both with ten times greater interest. What harm would it do them if he stayed out the third act? Per-

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haps it was really better for them that no interfering word of his should precipitate matters. And if he watched, must he not work, too? Could anybody expect of human nature, of artistic human nature, not to paint with the model seated opposite to him? Frank was not secretive by nature, though he never found it difficult to keep a secret; but he would be secretive now from his passionate eagerness to get this thing safely finished. But then, how to blind Lady Cromleigh; how, above all, to keep her quiet? How could she possibly have guessed that Mrs. Carstairs was Lady Middleton? And he remembered now how, on the first day on which he had seen the job secretary, Lady Cromleigh had seen her too. And while he thought he was simply worried by her hopeless incapacity, and had not owned to himself that he was interested as well as puzzled, Lady Cromleigh had been the one to pronounce

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that she was a very beautiful woman. But surely, surely Betty had not recognised her then?

He felt his position to be very perilous if at any moment Lady Cromleigh might speak to Middleton, and she was just the woman to do it. She was so dangerous because she was so fearless, and, like all slightly unscrupulous men or women, she could reach heights of indignation when she took the moral point of view for other people. He could imagine the scene if she told Middleton where his wife was to be found every day. "With your friend, the man with whom you are so intimate, in whom you confide. And he pretends he does not know. But he does know and he won't tell you, because he is determined to keep her to himself. He is perfectly infatuated about her." To a woman who lived on sensations and adored scenes would not that be a glorious oppor-

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tunity? And what a delightful reversal of everybody's relative moral positions. The ethereal, the exquisitely superior Lady Middleton would be considerably lowered, and he suspected that, for some reason or other, Lady Cromleigh would like to lower Lady Middleton, and certainly he, Frank Norbury, would be in Betty's eyes a fit and deserving object for punishment.

He felt in Lady Cromleigh an itch to have a finger in this pie; it seemed that she could not leave Middleton alone, although he had a strong suspicion that she disliked him. Certainly all the tiresome restlessness and curiosity that produce mischievousness in women were marked characteristics of this one. Well, he would risk it all, he was willing to take any risk. He would, without hesitation, have risked his soul at that moment to finish his work, and although he showed far more hesitation in the matter of risking his honour as a

man and a friend, he finally made up his mind to that also. He certainly, in the end, looked his wrong-doing in the face.

And with his consciousness awakened at last, he began to wonder what Sophy had been thinking all this time, but he went on to think of her just now simply as it might affect his own position. What did she know? She and Lady Cromleigh were growing intimate, and had a certain air of comradeship—which was not without its effect on Sophy's social position. In the world Sophy was doing well this winter, a thing of which he had felt vaguely glad; while he had been too busy to attend to social duties himself. He again wondered vaguely what was passing in Sophy's mind. She did not seem interested in his book, perhaps it was only that she was going out more than usual. He began to realise how little he had seen of her lately. Lady Crom-

leigh had thought her looking unwell, perhaps she was overdoing herself. He would try to see more of her and find out what she knew, and he would try to see as little as possible of Lady Cromleigh.

Meanwhile Frank became distinctly personally shy at the thought of seeing Lady Middleton next morning. It was impossible that the social side of things should not oppress him a little. The futile job secretary, the charming woman from an unknown world, solitary and detached, the exquisite mind and soul, fallen from the clouds and alighting by some accident in his little back study, had never awakened more than the recognition that she was supremely a lady. But the wife of that dignified Governor, Sir Walter Middleton, who ruled over a province as big as England and Scotland put together, the woman of his own world, or who ought to be in it, under the

circumstances was a natural cause for embarrassment.

Frank had rarely in his life been embarrassed and he disliked the sensation very much.

XVIII

BUT all hail to Art which rules her own subjects beneficently! Next morning when Frank found himself alone with Lady Middleton all embarrassment had vanished. He was so happy that he still had her there, that he could still pursue the quest of his heart, that his smile was very sunny and assured, though his eyes were tired. It had come to him in the watches of the night that, as his heroine was in reality Lady Middleton, he had to reconcile the character of Mrs. Carstairs with the conduct of Lady Middleton, and it really was hard to do so. How could the iron strength, the stern coldness, the amazing power of resistance described by Walter, be predicated of Mary Carstairs? He had made that distinction from the moment of Wal-

ter's real confidence—he had said to himself, and had been glad to say so, that, in this, his heroine and the strangely cruel Lady Middleton had not been alike. But now, now that he knew consciously that he had these two living beings in his grip, under his microscope, he must, if he were to be a truthful artist, face all facts, allow nothing to blind him; he must search her very soul and not shrink from recognising anything, whether lovely or ugly. If he found the bed rock of hard moral strength, even of a slow vindictiveness and a latent cruelty, he would face it, cost him what it might. That which, for want of another word, must be called the artistic conscience, was satisfied by this resolution and Frank felt some consciousness of heroism in the cause of truth.

The usual farce of looking over the copying of the day before was gone through, and, not for the first time, Frank wondered

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how it was that, although the secretary dropped her pens, and seemed very casual in her treatment of the ink pot, he had never seen the least stain of ink on those white fingers. She had the strangest combination of personal daintiness with ineffectiveness. This morning he looked at her with a fresh eagerness and he especially felt the dignity and grace of her figure. She had on a different, perhaps a thinner gown in honour of the spring sunshine. The simplicity of its cut defined the line of the figure in its outline from under the arm to the knee. She was slight but not really thin, and she had the peculiarity so dear to the Florentine artist of the late fourteenth century, that her garments seemed to flow round her and not to depend for support even on the full hip or on the sloping shoulder. It was a thing he found so hard to put into words, but he thought that the best way to express

it was to say that the winds of Heaven folded her garments round her with discreet reverence. He smiled as he reflected that the said flowing habit of drapery was singularly difficult to manage in a muddy London street. Mrs. Carstairs enjoyed the sensation of the new light spring gown and it gave a certain brightness to her pale face. He had seen little brightness there just lately unless she was skillfully talked into forgetfulness.

"I am entirely out of it with the book this morning," said Frank. "You see, I feel I have see-sawed. At first I understood my heroine's position quite clearly. I have seen her, actually seen her, until she left him and went away. Then by some freak of imagination I began to see his point of view. I cannot forgive him, but I see his position. I see him through his first anger while he is still under evil influence; his indignation at such severe

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punishment; his taking the man of the world's point of view, that it was wicked to make a scandal, and to risk two reputations when there had been nothing the world could not excuse. I begin to feel some sympathy with him when he asks, as I think he must ask, what right she had to treat him as a criminal, to go away with the child as if to open a case against him?"

"You keep forgetting," said the secretary, "what you have told me of your story, and what you have not told me. You forget that I have not read the chapter in which she went away with the child. We have spoken vaguely of her going into the desert, and we discussed whether Bruges would do for the desert. You have given me such fragments at a time that I am quite confused. I have no very clear idea of the book by now."

"Well, I will read aloud to you how she went away with the child," said Frank, and

then he read to her the chapter describing the flight. He thought from watching her face that the facts he had chosen for the story were sufficiently unlike what had happened, for her to be relieved. She had looked anxious at the first words and had then settled down. He looked up with surprise as he finished, for while he was reading Mrs. Carstairs had, for the first time, taken off her much veiled bonnet. He gazed at her in astonishment, not realising at the moment that to coil the hair simply in one roll at the back of the head can hardly be considered original. "But she does her hair exactly as Laura did it and oh, how like Laura is that wonderful pose of the small head! It is almost uncanny." He had looked at her in too obvious surprise and he feared that she must have noticed it, but she did not appear to do so.

"It is oppressively warm to-day," she said, as if explaining the rapid movement

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by which she had relieved herself of the bonnet and veil.

He hastily began to speak of the book. "Now," he said, "don't you see the difficulty? My hero loved his wife deep in the depths of his nature. I made you agree the other day to the possibility of the love reviving, but please, just for the sake of my book, let us play that he loved her all the time"—he did not wait for the reply. "Well, then, you see his history is so clear to me. In his first sense of shock he is simply angry, probably even pities the other woman for having her reputation in danger."

"She did not seem to have taken much care of it herself," said the secretary in a low voice.

Frank listened eagerly, and then went on. "Well, then, guilty in conscience, he takes his wife's conduct as an utter repudiation and condemnation. He is not, mind you,

in dispositions in which he can profit by her *coup d'état*. That, you see, was her great mistake. She was a woman who would think a great deal about things, forming ingenious theories, whereas wise people theorise so little. She thought that she could by one great *coup* clear the air, dispel the mists and restore him to himself. She risked all on that flight and she lost. She must have risked it in intense confidence in the man she had known during the past years of happiness. She must have believed the man of the last few weeks to be a horrible delusion. She saw that a strange temptation held him in its grip, but she did believe as yet that he loved her still, she did not count as nothing the seven years of love and fellowship in the road of life they had walked together. She still believed." Frank's voice quivered in its pleading. "She still had faith in that strong, noble nature. She knew that great and good men had

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been beguiled before, and even fallen far, far lower. She realised that he was still only on the brink of the abyss. Her mistake was that she thought, as you would put it, that she could do God's work; she would not be still and wait." Frank dared not look at her, but what a precious opportunity might be slipping away with the seconds that were passing. "So she took things into her own hands and she fled from him because she believed in him so much. And he was not fit for the strain. Mind you, what humility, what acknowledgement it would have needed for him to be fit for the trial. I don't despair of my hero, because he was not at that moment fit for it. I don't think he was in a state in which he could possibly have knelt to ask to be forgiven, but why could she not suspect that? Why could she not take the first step? When she saw she had made a terrible mistake why could she not open her arms to him and give him one

last chance? I am inclined to think that a deep resentment took hold of her when he did not come—that anger held her also and that her faith then began to fail. She began to take the view you take that the low love had killed the higher; she began to despair.”

There was silence. Frank strained for every sound, for he dared not look. The voice, low and sad, came at last.

“But, Mr. Norbury, she had gone away because she was not wanted. If he had wanted her, he had only to ask her to come back. You are a man and don’t understand. She ought not to have gone, she ought to have waited as you say for God to move, but she could not say ‘Take me back,’ if he did not want her. And if he wanted her it was so easy for him to show it. I conceive,” she went on, “that the longing, that the intense desire to be wanted back, in itself would make her dumb. Ah no, he did

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not want her, your hero, or he must have come for her!"

"I don't know yet how soon he realised his absolute need of her," said Frank. "Perhaps it was not quite at once, but it came very soon. You see the other woman faded rapidly, she was bound to go soon. In my book she had a rough element in her nature and she was worldly. Now at such a crisis the other woman must have been very angry, and though he was angry himself he would intensely dislike her view of his position. I could imagine her saying things of his wife that he could never forgive. No, up to a certain point that *coup d'état* had its effect, it took him back from the edge of the abyss. Do you know, I believe that my hero never felt attracted to even the best kind of friendship with any woman again. But I doubt if this change was good for him. I see in two ways the sincerity of his after life and its soli-

tariness. It was either a bitter disgust with women, with their view of life, their demands, their power of weakening a man of action; or it was a deep determination that the stronghold of his inner life should be kept ready for one person, that reparation and self-respect and a high ideal of purity should make a home for one soul to come back to if she would but do so. Anyhow, he was by nature a man of action, he worked and made his mark. I see and watch him and understand. I know he had bitter moments in the years that followed in which the other elements of pride and wrath were strong in him. You see, with all his hunger and his want of her, he could not quite forgive her. He could not quite forgive her for not having forgiven him. Mrs. Carstairs, don't you see that she never really gave him the opportunity for asking for forgiveness? Why did she not speak out to him frankly?"

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There was a moment's silence; then Mary Middleton said slowly:

"Do you know, Mr. Norbury, I doubt whether you make your heroine love him nearly enough."

Frank looked round as if surprised, but her head was turned from him.

"Don't you see," she continued, "that it was because she loved him too much that she could not explain? Do you think she was in a state in which she could be clever with him, tactful, even decently wise? Don't you think that whatever she did would be the most foolish thing? I can conceive that, for years after the parting, each mistake she made then would be branded on her memory. You put her in the wrong, everybody put her in the wrong, she had put herself in the wrong; but all this was because she was in love with him all the time. She had lost, I think, all self-confidence, she had not a very strong char-

acter—at least I gather so from your book.”

She stopped and a very long silence followed. Frank wanted to get away, he knew he had got all he could for the time. The vivisection could go no farther for that day. He wished intensely that he could have administered moral anæsthetics—he was so afraid she would not be fit for further experiment. “Not a strong character”—but a woman who loved, and loved intensely. He rose, shuffled his papers, pretended no excuse, and as he left the room he saw what he wanted. An old tortoise-shell framed looking glass hung on the wall low above the writing table. It framed now the face of a Mater Dolorosa. Young, utterly pale, with blue-lidded eyes, whence tears flowed down the unfurrowed cheeks. Had he used the knife just too far and to his own risk?

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Almost directly after Frank had left her, the secretary put her copying on one side. She rose and with the fingers of one hand lightly pressed on the table she gave a look round the room. While Norbury had been speaking an uncanny fear had come over her, and then she had felt that she let herself go to some influence that was besieging her mind and will. With each word of his description of his hero's life, there had been a growing sense of losing herself under the speaker's influence. She seemed to see the vision he put before her with extraordinary intentness and clearness. All the time it was her own husband whom she substituted for the hero, and it appeared to her as if Norbury were a witch, showing her visions that she only could interpret. And yet she had never interpreted her husband in that way before. How could Norbury be giving her imagined facts that were just the very data needed for this new interpretation? It

was so like Walter to behave and to think just as Frank's hero thought and behaved, that the psychological truth, the fitness of it, begat in her a moral certainty, and yet there were things hard to understand. Could the other woman then have faded quickly, and had he soon, very soon, wanted his wife again? Could it be true that he had wanted her very much and had never given a sign? Yes. Now she began to think it was possible. Could he really have wanted her, and have not understood how every note she wrote as to her address, her movements, the arrangements for the child, had only seemed to her to mean "Come to me"? And at last, but that had not come into Norbury's story, she had offered herself to him, had abased herself to the humiliation of being rejected. She had now the bitter little note in which he had answered that it was very good of her to offer to go out to India, but that he could not allow her to

make such a sacrifice on his account. And Frank said that Laura had never explained why she went away—that was true of herself, too. She had never explained why she went away, how could she, how could she put the hideous thing into words? Was it fair to blame her for that? But she knew now that silence was just what would have most profoundly irritated Walter. She had been dumb, and he had thought her hard as a rock. But all those years he had wanted her, all those years he had kept good for her sake. She could not, even after Norbury had left her, get over the strange, the overwhelming conviction that he had been telling her truths about Walter, and the pathos of those years of the solitary, proud man, often overworked, often ill, had broken up the foundations of her hardy acquired peace. She had wept uncontrollably, yet with a vague sense of being compelled by Frank's will not to hide anything from him.

All those years of misunderstanding, that old, crude word, was all she had to express the complex state of Walter's mind and her own. She knew so exactly the unacknowledged resentments, the pride that aped humility, what it was in Walter which would have made it seem intolerable to him that he was not forgiven. He might love her with all his heart, he might possibly even have never lost his love for her, as Mr. Norbury said,—and Mr. Norbury was so often right,—but he could never have taken punishment from her. Mary trembled. If it were true, this strange, uncanny, irresistible revelation, what did it mean? Was it merely a "Will-o'-the-wisp," leading her to fresh quagmires of mistakes and humiliations? She knew that she was very irresolute and very impulsive. As soon as the papers had said he was coming home on leave she had come to England. In a week she had closed that life of six years in *Bruges*

la Morte. She had told Nanna, as her reason, that Lucy must go to school, and then, on the very day she was to start, she had become frightened. She could not, she would not fling herself at her husband's head, she could not force him into the position of having to ask her to come back to him simply to save her humiliation. She arranged with the Post Office to forward her letters "care of Mrs. Carstairs," to a lodging on Campden Hill. She decided, on the spur of the moment, on the name of an old cousin who had died not long ago. The widow with whom she had lived so long in Bruges was going to give up the house, which she could no longer afford without the pension paid by Madame Middleton. Knowing that a time of intolerable suspense was before her, she had been thankful not to have Lucy's too watchful eyes upon her—even the old nurse's unspoken sympathy tried her too at times. Afterwards it seemed

to her that having come to England was so strong, so positive a move towards Walter that she shrank from any other.

She at first dreaded from utter nervousness to hear that he had been to see her lawyer, but gradually as the days passed and she heard nothing, that dread became a longing that the silence might be broken. When the silence was broken it was only to hear that Sir Walter had asked to be told where their child was at school, and to say that he wished to see his daughter. There had been apparently no reference to herself.

She had filled up these weeks with work that owing to an unexpected fall in her dividends, and to life in London proving far more expensive than life in Bruges, had become a necessity, if she were still to be independent of her husband's help, which she had always refused up till now. Work was also an absolute necessity for anything like sanity. She was fearfully anxious to keep a

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quiet mind. She prayed incessantly for wisdom and for tact. And now after these days of trial, in which she had found her only real anodyne to be the companionship of Frank Norbury, her only recreation her interest in his work; when her sense of suspense was at its height, there was this strange revelation. It seemed to be almost a message through him. Was Frank really something of a mesmerist? Had he not, all along, drawn things from her that no one else would have made her say? She had lately, she thought, been more on her guard; but even so,—she put her hand to her head, wondering what she had not told him. She looked round the little room very sadly. “I don’t understand,” she said, and her face became shadowy; she would have seemed to Frank a little indistinct and blurred if he had seen her. “I don’t understand,” she murmured in a very low voice. “I must not come again—yet I am sorry,—but I must

not." Norbury's study had been full of interest, of life—and Mary had stores of unspent, of delicate vitality accumulated in those six years in *Bruges la Morte*. There had been stores, too, of solitary thinking after much reading, and her mind had been hungry for this intellectual atmosphere. Yes, she was leaving the one refuge, the one way in which she could forget. And yet, if the last hour spent there had been the hour in which truth had reached her, an exquisite, extraordinary revelation, what did it matter? The little room seemed to hold something strangely intimate for her. If she had known all that it knew about her and Walter she would have believed that this sense of intimacy was a real result of the impression left by moral and mental conditions on their environment. The divan with its old red Turkey cover, the large arm chair in which she had sat so often; and in which, tho' she did

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not know it, Walter had twice spent the midnight hours; the table on which Frank had written their story opposite the low bookshelf, under the glass with the tortoise-shell frame: the bureau, under the window, with a locked drawer that held a guilty, indiscreet MS. She looked at it all and felt much to be there that she could not recognise or understand. Then she went out from the little, dark, ordinary room that had been her oasis—she was too afraid to stay, and she would never dare to come back.

As she came out she met Sophy, who was coming downstairs. She had not often seen Mrs. Norbury in her beautiful clothes with her dainty movements. But she had taken a fancy to her, she liked almost enviously her spick and span exquisiteness, and she had thought her eyes a little pathetic—as if there was something unexpressed, perhaps not understood by the little person herself.

It was as if the material things of life were owned to and acknowledged, but the immaterial and spiritual checked and kept within strict bounds. To-day she had no power of receiving impressions very distinctly, or she might have seen that Sophy's forehead first contracted and then instantly unknit as soon as she saw her. Sophy came forward.

"Good morning," she said gently, and then, "Do you know, I am afraid you are feeling faint?"

"I am, rather," Mary answered. "It is nothing; I shall be all right as soon as I get out into the air."

Sophy's tact prevented any further enquiry and the secretary, gathering herself together by a supreme effort, left the house. She crossed over, and looked back at it. Sophy was watching her go, as she had watched her come.

"What has she done to him and to me?"

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Sophy wondered. "We were comfortable before she came. But she put ideas into his head, and through his into mine. I never felt before how little we are to each other." She stopped, she was reserved, even with herself, and she was not given to self-questioning. "What have we missed? Could we have anything better now than we have had all this time?" She did not even put it into words. Envy of things mental and spiritual is quite a common state of mind. She was not really jealous of the secretary because she was beautiful, but because Mrs. Carstairs had so much that she had not. The job secretary had given Frank inspiration and an ideal. Sophy had never wished to be an inspiration or an ideal, but now she did feel left out in the cold. Like a forgotten child she wanted to cry out to Frank—"I too am here—and we were good company to each other; we had all we needed till now." And after all, she thought, though

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that woman may have much more of the things he wants, she does not really care about him. "It's so absurd to mind," concluded Sophy, speaking to the ideal world from the standpoint of the denizen of a practical world—"it's so silly."

XIX

It is extraordinary to think how many people consent to live in London who could live in the country. Take that one thing alone, the absolute longing to escape into silence and solitude. How long it takes to get away from those well-managed streets, those well-dressed men and women, any one of whom may prove to be somebody you know. Time after time we have seen Frank Norbury bent on escape almost like a lunatic; and, if he had only lived among woods, how different it would have been. That day on which he saw the tears on Mary Carstairs' face, I can conceive what green leaves and little fresh winds might have done to soothe him.

I think things might have been different

if there had been sun and shade, mottled green and gold about him; and, beneath him, green and brown paths very soft to tread upon. We are too little, after all, to be allowed to be together in such crowds, we need old mother earth to give us individual attention.

Frank's soul was too small a thing to be alone in the hard stony ways and the crowd of men.

I have to say that he went off again, walking at first fast and at last slowly, probably towards the east, through interminable streets, and, as he walked, I doubt if he betrayed anything incompatible with the appearance of the modern man about town; not particularly smart, certainly, but well groomed and wholly unremarkable. But within was an immense surging of feeling. Something had welled up in his heart that would absolutely have its way. There was at first a unity and sim-

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plicity about it that seemed to exclude the possibility of struggle and pain. He had felt himself cold and hard, even cruel in that last bit of vivisection. He had thought of himself as perhaps mean from some points of view, but justified, entirely justified as an artist. And then what had happened? This woman had cried, and his whole being was possessed with an overpowering tenderness and delight. Self-delusions as to art and his own position melted away. He would not name this new feeling, he wanted only to enjoy it. He had gone so far, penetrated further into the secrets of this personality than he had the right to do. There are sacred rights of reserve in the spiritual and mental worlds as well as in the material. Ignatius Loyola made his stern military wrath felt by any disciple whose eyes were long fixed on his loved leader's face. No one must force a way into the inner places of the personality

of another, or there are no secrets left for God.

Frank had intruded too far and this strange overwhelming sweetness was the disguise in which punishment had come to him. It was as if justice kissed him first before the *peine forte et dure* was to begin. So brief was this sweetness that it began to fade in an hour's time, or perhaps less. Then he began to feel guilty. If Mary Carstairs had been one whit less complete, had in any one point compromised with this earthly world and its principles, Frank would have known no shame. To him in past days there would have been no harm, nothing wrong in this strange surpassing feeling. But now he could not but see that by her standards, from her point of view, he was face to face with temptation. And hence began the excitement that found no soothing in the stony streets. It was intolerable and absurd that her stand-

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ards should control even his thoughts, so that he might not even delight in his feeling for her, without discomfort in the region she would call his conscience. If nothing were to come of this, if this new longing were never to be satisfied, who could forbid him the dreary comfort of thinking of her as he chose? Sophy? What business was it of hers what he thought about? Walter Middleton? What could it matter to him? For all that day he kept forcing from his mind the further results of this mental discovery. For it was a discovery—a revelation of what he now believed had been going on for some time past. Which day, which moment had it begun? Late in the afternoon he went home, got out his MS. and read it through; clearer and clearer it became to him that this portrait had been drawn by a man whose imagination had been captured and excited to the last degree. But there had been a

moment when the imagination was not content to serve alone and the heart had gone in the same way. At what moment he did not know even now.

Frank at least had his dream and, as he read, he said to himself that it was utterly worth while whatever followed; he would make the most of it and dare the reproof in the eyes he dreamed of. And then, when he saw them again, they would never know that the dream existed.

He went out to dinner as one dazed, and Sophy, who had seen the secretary leave the house that morning, also as one dazed, was not unobservant of his face. She looked more than usually tired that evening.

It proved to be Frank's unwelcome lot to take Lady Cromleigh in to dinner.

XX

BEFORE dinner was far advanced Frank discovered that there was something new in Lady Cromleigh's attitude. He had the impression that she wanted him to forget their last two conversations, though he could not understand why. Then seeing that they had evidently made too much of an impression for her to efface it so easily, she at last turned to him and said in a very friendly, candid voice:

"Mr. Norbury, I am going to say something that you may or may not understand, but I trust you not to ask me to explain it. If you think I know something that you know, I want to tell you first that I am not sure if I know it or not. Secondly, that, even if I were quite sure that I knew it, I would not lift a little finger to interfere.

I see no good in hurrying other people's affairs. Thirdly or fourthly (I hardly know where I am in my discourse), I shall never let anybody, not even Sophy, know that I think, or at any time thought, that you knew anything about it. Lastly, if what I think I know is true, and you know it to be true, I admire you now for not acting upon your knowledge to hurry anything. Leave things to time. Now, as an Amen, I add that you need make no response or even look at me. We will talk, please, of a play called 'Injustice'—of course you have seen it?"

It is difficult to exaggerate the relief in Frank's mind as Lady Cromleigh spoke. It was the one real danger that he saw vanishing away. He had felt that it was in her hands to do immense mischief. And now she absolutely chose to range herself on the side of non-interference, although why she did so he could not under-

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stand. He did not want to face facts to-night, but this conversation forced them upon him. He was obliged, as he sat in a quiet corner at his club that night, to face the fact that he and Lady Cromleigh had entered into an evil pact to conceal from Walter Middleton their knowledge of his wife's whereabouts. He was sure that Lady Cromleigh had some motive of which she was determined not to be ashamed, and, in thinking of her motive, he could not shut out of complete consciousness what he really knew to be his own. It had not been mere self-deceit to suppose that his book had been his motive, he did not love his book the less now that he realised his other feelings. His art, his book, the model, all led to the same wishes and the same temptation to a disloyal silence. After all, was he not morbid? Was there not real truth in Lady Cromleigh's point, that it was not her business or his to interfere, and that

it was even dangerous to hurry matters? Yes, but then Lady Cromleigh did not know one hundredth part of what he knew about the Middletons. Even now he hugged his sense of the possession of that knowledge as a thing of immense artistic value. He had come to his own definite conclusion from all this knowledge of his. He was quite sure that some accident, though he could not think what, was keeping them apart. Some such strange, malign accident, as we are falsely inclined to believe to be the exclusive property of the stage and of fiction, had prevented their seeing each other face to face. He was inclined to think that pride and nervousness and too great feeling had made one or both of them do some very stupid thing, which had been the opportunity of an accident. Possibly the woman had made too elaborate an arrangement, which had broken down somewhere, to be accessible without ac-

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tually asking him to come to her. Lady Cromleigh might think that they were not wishing for each other from the depths of their hearts, but he knew better. He had seen the clear tears rolling down the pale cheeks, he had seen the man's face as he sat in that same little study, looking his great suffering from his own eyes into Frank's. The whole picture worked up in his imagination until he was again deep in his book, every nerve alive with his powers of perception.

And at that moment two men standing in front of him parted, and he saw the tall figure of Walter Middleton a little way off. As if it were a matter of course Walter came to him at once, and sat down in the nearest chair. It was an isolated corner.

"I have not seen you for many days," said Middleton.

"Where have you been?" asked Frank,

who had exerted considerable ingenuity to avoid him.

"Anywhere and everywhere within a couple of miles," said Walter, and then they were silent. "I shall be off very soon, now, which is one subject of rejoicing."

Frank sat up as if he had been shot.

"Going away!" he cried. "But not for long?"

"For three years at the least. It's not the thing I wanted. Pentonville has been got at by the other party, or is annoyed at my articles. But the climate is excellent, and there comes a stage of existence when, detesting life, we spend most of our energies in trying to prolong it."

Frank stared at him in silence, he did not even ask him where he was going.

"You see," Walter went on, "I have no further reason for being here. I am quite convinced that no good can be done.

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After some hesitation I went to see her lawyer. He declared that there had been no intention of suppressing the address for her letters. After she left Bruges the letters were to be forwarded from the post office to the care of a certain Mrs. Carstairs in Kensington. You see it has all been so cleverly done to make it easy to write, but impossible to see her. Then my girl is at a convent school where I could go whenever I liked. Evidently the lawyer was very much surprised that I had not come to him at once on reaching London. I did not tell him that I had been to Bruges. Nothing could have proved to me better how anxious she is to avoid me than her actually sending the child away from her. I went down to the convent."

Norbury leaned forward eagerly, he had so long wanted to see the girl.

"She is not the least like her mother, a very tall, bright, active child, brimming

over with intelligence, but she has my nose unfortunately," he gave a wan little smile. "Women are amazingly subtle. You would not think that the child knew that her mother and I had ever had a difference. She spoke of how they kept my birthdays, and how they had even talked of when I should come home; and that last was the worst of it. But I saw a nervous look in her honest grey eyes when she spoke of her last visit from her mother. She said one inconceivable thing as unconsciously as possible. She told me that they sometimes went to Knocke for sea air and once they had been on pilgrimage to Einsiedeln 'to pray for you to get strong, Daddy—only mother had been so anxious she was almost too ill to travel'—and then her eyes filled with tears."

"Damn it, damn it!" muttered Norbury under his breath. There was a long silence.

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"But you have written to her?" he said at last.

"No, I can't write to her, the thing is impossible. I know exactly the sort of little note I should get in answer. The only chance was to see her, and it's absolutely useless to see a cold, clever block of marble. I understood what the lawyer thought about it. Well, I went so far in my despair as to ask the old man if she had ever given him any reason to suppose that she might come to a reconciliation, and he said, 'I wish there had been any sign of it, Sir Walter, I most sincerely wish there had been—but I can't say I have seen it.' "

"And is he a man she would confide in?"

"Walter did not answer—there was an intensity of pain in his face, yet it hardly looked as dark as Frank's. They sat on saying little more, from time to time dropping a word that added nothing to what had

gone before. It was one o'clock before they parted and Frank walked home alone. "What amazing stupidity and what preposterous pride—the man has been in the sulks for six years, and I suppose he can't stop the habit. He deserves to suffer for it. Why can't he just go down on his knees and kiss the hem of her garment? It's hideous to think that she loves him. Conceive that lonely pilgrimage with the child to pray for him." Frank wanted to be angry with him, he wanted to drown his own recognition of Middleton's sufferings.

Frank was alone in his study when the thing came to a head, and all that was fictitious and unreal broke down. The little room was full of her presence, a presence into which he had never brought a desecrating thought. He thought of her there,

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and the sweetness gained upon him. He had learnt there a higher ideal of life, he had learnt there to think of truth and of justice, and of those things in which there was praise of discipline. He threw his arms above his head for a moment as he cried aloud:

“It’s all nonsense, I can’t go through with it.”

I can’t tell the value of that moment, for I don’t clearly see how much he had to sacrifice. It is difficult to give the whole of that day more than a certain sentimental value, and yet, where love has newly touched a man, the pain of turning his back on it is sharp enough. It seems unreal to make too much of this feeling for which he could never have hoped for a return. It is so obvious that he could not be so unutterably mean and base as to let Walter Middleton go away deceived. But there are positions in life in which it is very good indeed not

to be very bad indeed. These choices come to some, and the looker on has no right to belittle the good because the evil was almost impossibly base.

But if Frank could not go through with it, what lay before him? What was he to do? Wild schemes came through his mind and were banished. To make them meet accidentally in this room? It could easily be done. He was too heavy in his mind now to picture to himself that meeting, that end to the story in life and in his art. He rejected it as an artist and as a practical person. Then a thought came. He would ask Middleton to read his book, and after he had read such a view of the woman's position, her past, her suffering, her love, surely he would understand his wife!

XXI

It was Sunday morning, and Frank, who had slept little, was at his work. He was reading, correcting, making the MS. ready to go to Walter Middleton. Sometimes he shrank at the fearfully intimate nature of the thing, but on the whole he gained courage.

Would Middleton, he wondered, rush through the story, simply to get the truth from it? He would hardly, he thought, realise the beauties of the book. The first critic might not see that this was a masterpiece. Frank was as quietly confident of its strength as if the world had proclaimed its success with a thousand voices. But the more he realised its excellence the more he dreaded the inevitable conclusion, that it would not be fair to Mary Carstairs that

it should ever be published. He had been struggling against the thought, but it only grew clearer to him that the result of his exceptional opportunities was that he had gained secrets of the heart that he had no right to give to the world. It was the sort of opinion that comes in flashes and disappears as quickly—seen for a moment as a clear case of right and wrong, at the next moment it appeared a morbid scruple. This was a sacrifice of the most clear, most practical kind. It was the sacrifice of fame, success, money, but, worst of all to Frank, it was the destruction of his adored work just at its birth. Sometimes, as he read, he flung the MS. down with tears in his eyes.

Norbury had never thought himself to be a very chivalrous person, but the chivalry in him was tyrannous in its strength now. His kindness, his sympathies were fighting the artist in him. Strange in the complexity of

human nature is the alternative power of head, of imagination, of the heart. And we know ourselves so little, that, in a case like Frank's, a man cannot foresee that the complete absorption in one faculty of itself tends to reaction. For many weeks the imagination had kept the heart in thrall and had suspended the judgment; now the offended faculties were in revolt. And once on the way to higher aims, once having suppressed in himself, as far as he now could, the feeling that had been growing in him for Mary Carstairs, he felt drawn to go further. A wish for sacrifice had got hold of him. It seemed to him now that it would be the most horrible selfishness to make capital out of this story of his two friends; it would be loathsome to read the reviews, to receive the royalties on account for what had been torn in this room out of the very soul of Mary Carstairs. And then, would it even be possible to show this book to

Walter Middleton, unless he could at the same time tell him that it was never to see the light? If he thought this account of himself and his wife were to be published, in what spirit would he read it? Would it win or repel him? The fact in itself that his wife had been all these weeks helping Norbury in this intimate way might rouse the jealousy of which his friend felt him to be capable. No, the only way in which there was any possibility of the book doing good was to offer it as a living sacrifice that it might bring happiness to Mary Carstairs.

It would be hard to exaggerate his suffering; and the strange way in which he found any relief, was in working, still working at the story itself. Whatever else happened, he felt as much obliged to finish it as if the printer's devil were waiting for copy in the hall. It might have to die at once, but it should be a complete thing first, if no eye but

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his own ever saw it. Gradually, as he wrote, the heavy sadness of his mood was a little lightened, though throughout there were stabs of pain. But the artist gained upon the man as he drew to the close. He forgot everything but his work, forgot the dreary emptiness of his prospect, of his future, of the room he sat in—he forgot Sir Walter and Mary as they existed outside of his own work. Excitement gained upon him, he trembled, he longed to finish this thing, to reach the real end—to complete the thing for love of the thing's own self. Perhaps this last chapter had better not be sent to Sir Walter, but, sent or not, it must be written. And yet, when he tried to see what it was to be, how hard it was to see truly. He saw the man and the woman so clearly apart, but he could not see them together. Would it necessarily be a success if they did meet? Yes, absolutely a success. All his conviction rose to that. But then, if

he recognised in them both the total absence of self-consciousness and worldliness, the kind of simplicity that would make love so strong and satisfying a thing to them and reconciliation at last so obvious, how could he convey it in his book? A happy ending—could he achieve that enormous artistic difficulty, a happy ending? But he must not hurry on, first he must decide how they were to be brought together. And gradually he realised that he had neglected one person in the story, not Laura, nor the man, nor the other woman, but the child. The child and her father together. What must it have been to the child brimming over with intelligence, a girl of twelve, at the age when a girl so often has a premature sense of life and responsibility? Did she hope, when she heard that the long dreamt of father was actually coming down to see her, that her mother would come with him? Was it not dreadful pain to realise all her fears as she waited in

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vain for him to mention her mother? He was simply and absolutely her hero. He was General Gordon and Bayard and a faultless Warren Hastings rolled into one. Her mother had suggested all this and she absolutely revelled in her hero worship. And he looked all she expected and the tenderness of his voice thrilled the little worshipper. Only how ill, how worn and how unhappy he looked! She was so shy that at the first moment she could not speak, but the honest grey eyes told such a tale, that Middleton, even in the depths of his gloom, had brightened at the memory. To the child, knowing how her mother had longed for him to come back, it seemed too ghastly a realisation of the unacknowledged cloud that had always hung over her home, that he had come to her and was with her while her mother was left out. To-day, Sunday, Middleton was again at the convent, and the poor little daughter would be torn by

happiness and misery. They ought to have known, Norbury thought with anger, how bad it was at her age, and growing fast, to go through so much. Would her father tell her now how soon he was going away? He saw the tall man, with the stoop of the strong shoulders, walking in the avenue near the convent as they would walk to-day. She was tall too, a long hobbledehoy with a full heart and such anxiety. She would hide her tremors, trying to keep bright and make him bright. At last he would, when there was only a quarter of an hour left, speak to her of her mother, and ask the child, in hesitating accents, if she thought her mother well. Frank was 'convinced he would, and the hot colour would rise all over her face in an instant.

“Nanna thinks she is stronger than she used to be. Bruges suited her. Do you know, when we came down here she took off the horrid veils she generally wears

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and the nuns thought she was my sister?"

Frank saw the whole scene as though it were actually happening. The girl's answer checked the talk for the time, but presently the father said,

"And how is Nanna?"

"She is not very well and, Daddy, she frets so about me; she will think I must be ill because she does not air my sheets. I shall be fussed to death in the holidays."

It was a brave effort, but the word holidays almost choked her. Then her father told her that he was going away, very gently, but it broke her down and the poor child cried and cried. He was astonished at her emotion, astonished at the devotion to himself. He led her to a bench and tried to soothe her. She was inarticulate with her sobs.

"Why can't we . . .?" she managed to say, and then wept more abundantly. It was really very difficult to know what to say

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to her. It was settled and decided that he should go in two weeks' time and be away for three years. What could he say to her? It would be grossly unfair to suggest any plan of their being together without a word to her mother. He was at his wit's end when a nun was seen coming towards them.

"Go, Daddy, go, it's time," she managed to say. "Don't let her come while I am like this."

And then the child went through an hour of agony of indecision, but at last she did the thing she dreaded, she wrote to him a dreadful scrawl of a letter. Frank could see her brown head bent over her desk in the empty schoolroom, and he knew what she would say as clearly as if he were there. She would write:

"Oh Daddy why don't you go to Mother when she wants you so dreadfully much? She cries and cries and I cry because you won't go and see her. Please,

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please, Daddy go to 7, Campden Hill Terrace and see her. It's so hard when she has been alone all this time wanting you.

Your very loving daughter.

Don't be angry with me if I ought not to write this but I can't stand it any more."

A quiet nun, passing the desk and seeing the blotted envelope addressed to her father, undertook that it should catch the first post on Monday, as the Sunday post had already gone.

Thus far Frank was certain: but could he venture any further? He seemed in this mood to foresee, almost to bring about, the end. To-morrow Mrs. Carstairs would get her employer's letter, saying that there would be no work for her to do for him for several days. Frank was really by now hardly conscious of what was fiction and what was reality. In the middle of the day, or perhaps in the afternoon, if he were out till then, Sir Walter would get the little blotted letter,

and he would obey it. Into that lodging-house sitting-room he would go, looking so much too big for it. And then she would come in from the back room in her light spring frock, and would see him, gaunt, bent, with the deep suffering eyes, and he would see her beautiful, neither old nor young, dateless, with the freshness of the immortal spirit. He would try to speak. Frank could hear him. The only words were:

“May I come, Mary?” and her answer was to cry:

“But, dearest, you are ill; no one told me that you were so ill.”

She had a hand on each shoulder, and looked at him in an ecstasy of anxiety.

“Walter, you will let me nurse you this time; you must forgive everything.”

Norbury could not tell then whether he actually knelt down, but he knew with a sigh of relief that the man was capable of

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intense self-abasement in her presence. The pride, the infinite sulks, the resentment vanished and at a touch of her hand he was her slave. They were terribly loving and simple, those two, and unspotted by the world. They would soon be laughing, probably at some ineffectiveness of hers, and they would not mind even Nanna's tearful eyes. But really Nanna would have only one idea in her head. She would say at last in a huffed voice:

"And is Miss Lucy to stay at school, that is what I want to know?"

And then they would feel amazement that it had not struck them at once. Frank almost thought they would go down that very night, and make the child unutterably happy and unutterably shy by their own absence of shyness. They really ought to be in some quiet country place, they would make themselves absurd in London. "I quite hope they will stay away for a bit."

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And then he came to himself—and knew that, in the rough, his book was finished. *A quoi bon?* for he knew, too, not only that that last chapter could never be shown to Walter Middleton, but he knew now decisively that the book must never be published at all. He took a sheet of notepaper and wrote fast, as if he were afraid of stopping.

“Dear Middleton:—Last night I could find nothing to say to you, but I knew all the time that I profoundly disagreed with what you were saying. My view of your story has got strangely enough interwoven into my book. So strangely and intimately have you and others come into it that I recognise that it is not fitting it should be published. It goes to you by messenger with this note. Read it now, and then destroy it. But as you will be its only reader, do it the justice to read it very carefully; omit nothing. What is not copied by myself is in the writing of the secretary, Mrs. Carstairs. Her work with me finishes with the book.

Ever yours,

“F. NORBURY.”

“The writing of the secretary, Mrs. Carstairs.” For one moment he thought

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only of Middleton opening the parcel and seeing the writing of the secretary, Mrs. Carstairs. "And so dies Mrs. Carstairs," he said to himself, "she had a short life," but it seemed to him that that short life had belonged in a special way to himself.

Unconsciously he began to scribble the shape of a tombstone on a scrap of paper.

"Here lies Mary Carstairs," he murmured—"who died in infancy. To know her was a liberal education, to describe her was not allowed by the jealousy of the gods—to dream of her was forbidden by herself. Stranger, if you read these lines," he laughed aloud now, "to the memory of this admirable lady, you may be glad that you never knew her, but that would prove that you are an ass."

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It was two days later, and Frank had heard nothing of the Middletons. He was walking slowly down Bond Street and had

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passed the window of a well-known jeweler's shop when the door opened, and a tall man held it back for a lady to pass. She glanced up at her companion as she came out.

"Heavens! it's indecent to look as happy as that!" thought Frank. He crossed the road quickly, and could only just see through the crowd that the Middletons were getting into a taxicab. He had an impression of much lifting and helping on the part of the man.

"It's rather like an old nurse getting the child out of the water into the bathing machine," he thought.

Drearily Frank walked home and drearily he dressed to go to the play with Sophy and a tame cat. He was obviously so depressed that even the tactful guest could not quite suppress his surprise at the intense gloom his host did not attempt to conceal. Sophy seemed to see nothing, she

talked and laughed and told her latest news just as usual. And the latest news was interesting, for it was the engagement of Lord Pentonville and Lady Cromleigh.

"It has hung fire for a long time," said the tame cat. "And yet it got into one of the papers six months ago."

"Perhaps that was what made it take so long," said Mrs. Norbury.

"Well, I don't think it was that, in fact I believe there was some mischief made."

"Mischief?" asked Sophy.

"Somebody, I believe I know who it was, too, raked up an old story of a flirtation between her and your friend, Norbury, —Sir Walter Middleton."

"No," cried Sophy, and Frank leant forward eagerly.

"It was said that Middleton's wife would not forgive him in consequence—and Pentonville is particular. That is the story. Anyhow, as of course you have heard, Mid-

leton has accepted the governorship of ———; it is a wretched thing to give him; people are surprised at his taking it, but he is too strong a man to be kept in the background for long, as they will soon find out. So he is going far enough off, and it is known to-day that his wife goes with him. Have you ever met her?"

"Yes," said Frank.

"You know her, Frank?" asked Sophy in astonishment.

"I have been seeing her lately," he answered with embarrassment. Sophy was too tactful to press the point.

"What is she like?" she asked eagerly.

"She is a beautiful woman," he said slowly. "And a very good one."

Frank and Sophy were willing to leave the play before the last act was more than just begun, but he suddenly felt it impossible

to go over the story with her, so he let the tame cat put her into the motor and walked home.

He sat long in his study, tired and more and more miserable. There was nothing pleasurable or profitable in a stale world. He would never write again after that book cut off at its birth. He was sick of the old meaningless, artistic work he had done hitherto. He hated travelling, society was detestable. What a miserable thing was life!

"We hate to live and we fear to die," he muttered. Such short years of hope and such long ones of disillusion. He was disgusted to-night with the whole scheme of things in which his lot was cast, and disgusted still more with himself. All the trammels of civilisation he felt to be an intolerable tyranny to the individual. How could a man live a really free and a sane life under present conditions? How, above all, could

he change himself,—product and slave as he was of the very civilisation he detested? There was something wrong in it all, something very wrong certainly in the education that developed such a *dilettante* useless being as Frank Norbury. The imagination was roused and opened and cultivated, and then left to devour itself. There was something wrong, too, in his absorption in his own work. This life must be meant for other activities than the incessant analysis of human nature. The fever of analysis in a genius like Balzac, devoured his entrails, burnt them like phosphorus, and he died young. Was there nothing else in life for which Frank was fit than to carry on, in his own feeble way, this work that poisoned the worker as surely as leaded glaze poisons the potter?

At last he went upstairs ~~and~~, to his surprise, saw a light under Sophy's door. It felt soothing and companionable; in his

oppressive sense of solitude he suddenly felt it would be a relief to talk to Sophy. He knocked gently and she told him to come in. She was not in bed, but sitting near the low fire—her white dressing gown fell in folds about her and all her brown hair was loose on her shoulders.

“I was afraid of disturbing you, but I should like to talk!” he said.

She looked very pale as she turned her round blue eyes towards him—like a sad and tired child, he thought.

“I want to tell you about the Middletons,” and he did tell her . . . everything except the things he left out. The story seemed to grow in interest, Sophy’s questions bringing it out more and more clearly to them both.

“Mrs. Carstairs is Lady Middleton,” Sophy repeated softly several times, and she looked at Frank who sat with bowed head on a low chair on the other side of

the fire. "And you helped to make them come together?"

"Yes," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

"How?" asked Sophy.

Frank did not say that he saw now that, all along, he had made each understand the other, he went straight to the conclusion, to the fact that he had sent the book to Walter Middleton.

"You have heard nothing from them?" asked Sophy.

"Nothing yet. I told him . . ."

Frank hesitated, and at last he brought it out. "I told him to read the book and burn it, because it obviously can never be published."

Sophy suddenly put her face between her hands and sobbed.

Frank looked at her in amazement; he could not remember that he had ever seen her cry.

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"And I shall never see it!" cried Sophy, "after we have always read your books together before. I thought at least, though everything else was a failure, I might help in your work."

"He has destroyed his best book for another woman's sake," was the thought in her poor little heart.

"But you did not seem to care."

"How could I seem to care when—when you hardly spoke to me about it? You spoke to me about nothing. In February there was a whole week in which you spoke to me once."

Frank was aghast.

"And now, and now when I have been miserable all the winter, you have destroyed the book; I don't understand you."

"Sophy, dear, dear Sophy," cried Frank, and he rose and bent over her.

"Don't," she said. "I can't breathe—open the window."

"You are not well, Sophy."

"Are you finding that out now?" Sophy gave a bitter little laugh.

"Darling," cried Frank, more and more upset, as he began to realise the other side of the picture in the past winter. "Darling, why didn't you tell me?"

"I did tell you."

"When?"

"Don't you remember one evening I said I had been to see a doctor because I had been feeling ill for some time, and you did not even ask me what he said?"

"I don't remember——"

"No, you did not listen."

"But tell me now, do tell me now, darling——" he had put his hand on her shoulder, but she moved a little so that it fell.

"Do you care to know?" she asked.

"Sophy," cried Frank, "how can you?" He knelt down beside her, and he felt how frail and slight a thing she was, and how

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fearfully pathetic. She saw the real pain in his face.

"What geese we were to marry, weren't we, Frank? Such babies, we knew nothing about it, what it could mean and how it could hurt."

She was unconsciously falling into their old habit of companionship.

"We just fell into the way of being together and doing what everyone else did. And all the time it was this dreadful big thing of marriage, and it was sure to hurt in the long run."

Frank had got hold of one of the little white hands and was kissing it; the little white feet had come out of the slippers and looked like a child's.

"But Sophy, tell me how you are?"

"Oh, I'm better," she said irrelevantly. "And now here we are; and I don't see how the fact that we are married is to be got rid of."

"Thank goodness it can't," said Frank.

She looked at him searchingly.

"It is all very odd," she said. "I suppose the theory in your book is true."

He did not ask what the theory was. "Only," she said boldly, "in some cases the wife is inferior to— Poor dear," she added, suddenly repenting of her one little stab, and she turned towards him at last.

"I'm not so very interesting," she went on, "but I think we might be just a little happy. I should like to go to your old home, Frank—where you were born and grew up—I should like our child to be born and to grow up there, too."

Then they said very little more, but they stayed there close together till the light dawned slowly over the London houses. And after he had left Sophy, with one of her happy tears shining on his forehead, Frank stood by the window, looking out

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on a new world, made new by the oldest possible joy.

“But is it not strange,” he murmured to himself, “that, just when I valued life so little, it seems to me to be so amazingly valuable a gift to have a child born into this stale old world? Is it not strange that, when I know myself, the poor mean and selfish thing I recognise myself to be to-night, I can rejoice to have so great a charge given to me? I have promised myself to-night to make my wife happy and my child good, and I have done it in all hope just when I have lost confidence in myself. Am I, in this hope, stretching out towards what is far greater and more loving than myself, or am I a child ‘crying in the night?’ But if I am that child it is very singular that a voice seems to answer me, and in some sense at once to chide me and to bless.”

XXII

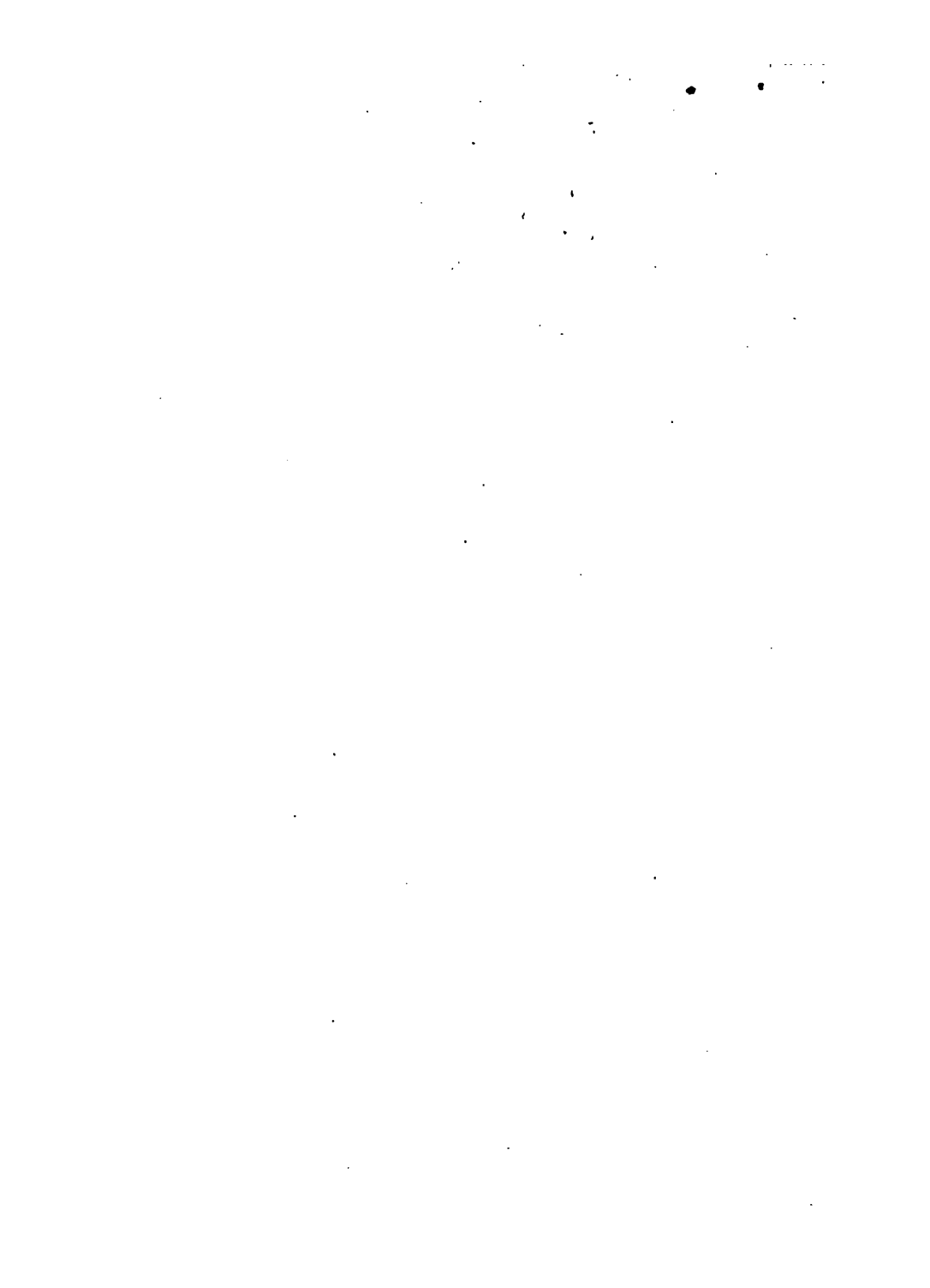
But the book was not destroyed. The Middletons insisted that it should be published.

"The beast described in it thoroughly deserves all he gets!" wrote Sir Walter to Frank, "and we don't think it is really so like Mary as to be recognised. If it is we shall be very far away and it can do us no harm."

The tone of the letter was warm, but there was no mention in it of meeting again before they left England, and of that Frank was truly glad.

Such was the history of the novel which turned Frank Norbury's literary reputation into fame.







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